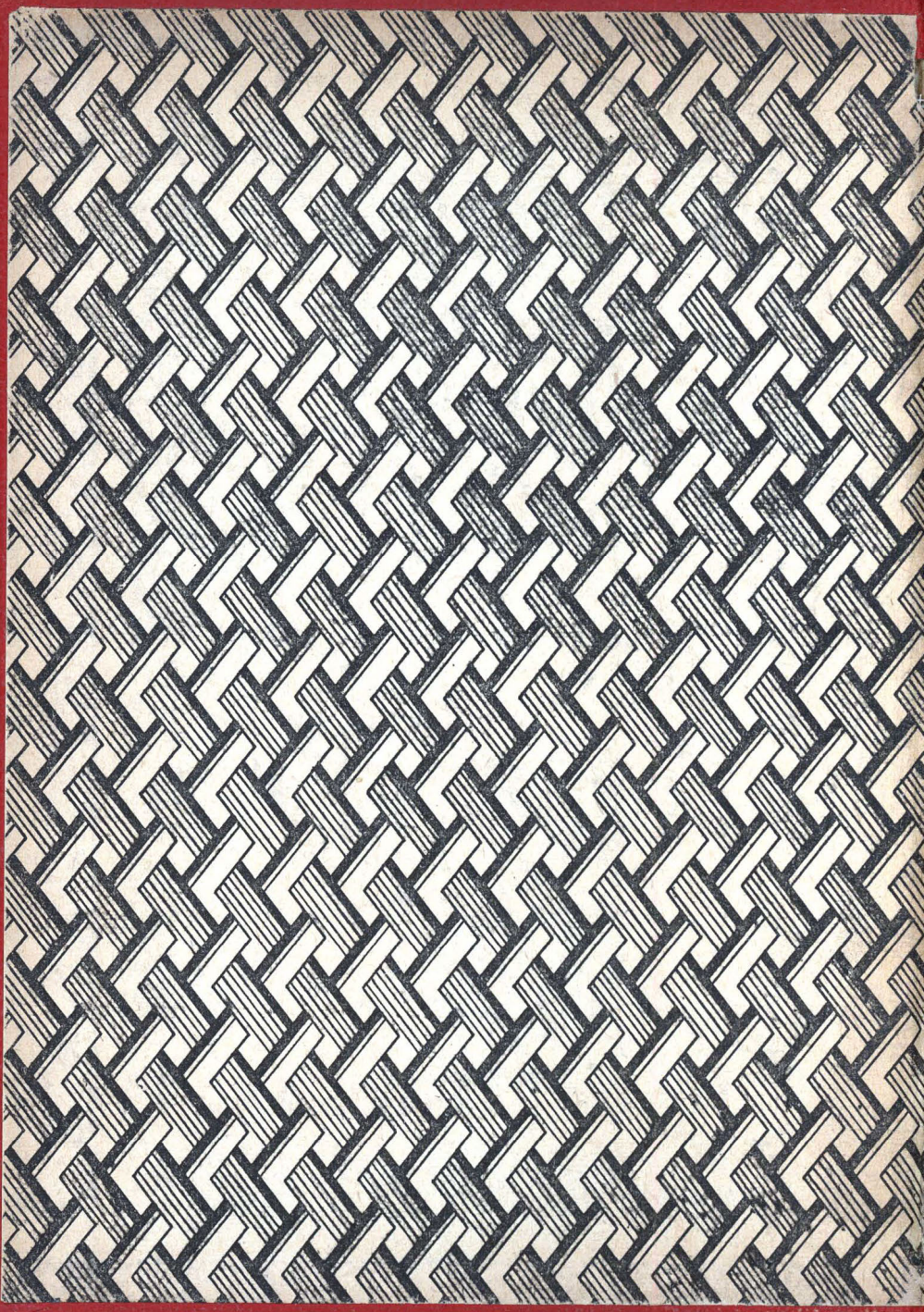
VOICE FROM *the* CAVE

MILDRED A. WIRT



This is my book

_____

_____

_____

"Where are you taking our car?" Penny demanded.
"Voice from the Cave"

(See Page 21)

Voice from the Cave

By

MILDRED A. WIRT

Author of

MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES

PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

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PENNY PARKER

MYSTERY STORIES

TALE OF THE WITCH DOLL
THE VANISHING HOUSEBOAT
DANGER AT THE DRAWBRIDGE
BEHIND THE GREEN DOOR
CLUE OF THE SILKEN LADDER
THE SECRET PACT
THE CLOCK STRIKES THIRTEEN
THE WISHING WELL
SABOTEURS ON THE RIVER
GHOST BEYOND THE GATE
HOOFBEATS ON THE TURNPIKE
VOICE FROM THE CAVE

Other Titles in Preparation

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Voice from the Cave

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CONTENTS

1	AN UNINVITED GUEST	1
2	STORMY WEATHER	10
3	A JADE GREEN CHARM	19
4	NO CAMPING ALLOWED	27
5	OVER THE AIR	37
6	BREAKFAST BLUES	42
7	THE BEARDED STRANGER	49
8	KEEPER OF THE LIGHT	57
9	A SURPRISE FROM THE SKY	66
10	HELP FROM MR. EMORY	74
11	A MAN OF MYSTERY	83
12	CAUGHT BY THE TIDE	93
13	A HIDDEN PACKAGE	98
14	VOICE FROM THE CAVE	106
15	AFTERGLOW	114
16	SUSPICION	122
17	VISITORS NOT PERMITTED	130
18	INSIDE THE LIGHTHOUSE	139
19	A LOCKED DOOR	146
20	NYMPHS OF THE SEA	154
21	THE CARDBOARD BOX	161
22	UNFINISHED BUSINESS	170
23	NIGHT ADVENTURE	178
24	OUT OF THE SEA	187
25	A SCOOP FOR UNCLE SAM	198

CHAPTER

1

AN UNINVITED GUEST

"MRS. WEEMS, what can be delaying Dad? He promised faithfully to be home by three o'clock and it's nearly five now. Unless we start soon we'll never get to Sunset Beach tonight."

Penny Parker, in blue slacks and a slightly mussed polo shirt, gazed disconsolately at the over-loaded automobile standing on the gravel driveway of the Parker home. Aided by Mrs. Weems, the family housekeeper, she had spent hours packing the sedan with luggage and camping equipment. Though the task long had been finished, Mr. Parker failed to arrive.

"Your father is a very busy man," Mrs. Weems responded to the girl's question. "No doubt he's been held up at the office."

"Then why doesn't he telephone? It's driving me crazy to wait and wonder."

Penny's freckled little face twisted into a grimace

of worry. For weeks she and her father, editor-owner of the *Riverview Star*, had planned a vacation camping trip to the nearby seashore resort, Sunset Beach. Twice the excursion had been postponed. Penny, who knew well her father's habit of changing his mind, was fearful that even now something would cause another vexing delay.

"I'm going to call the *Star* office this minute!" she declared, starting for the house.

Mrs. Weems busied herself gathering up loose odds and ends that had blown about the yard. She was cramming waste paper into a box when Penny banged out the door, her eyes tragic.

"I couldn't reach Dad!" she announced. "He left the office more than an hour ago."

"Then he should have been home before this," Mrs. Weems agreed.

"Something's happened. Maybe he's been run down by a car—"

"Now Penny, stop such wild talk," the housekeeper interrupted sternly. "You know better."

"But Dad was struck by an automobile last winter. What else could delay him?"

"A dozen things," Mrs. Weems replied. "Probably a business engagement."

"In that case, wouldn't he have telephoned me?"

"Perhaps not. Now do stop fretting, Penny. Your father will be here before long."

"He'd better be," Penny said darkly.

Sitting down on the stone step by the door, she scuffed the toe of her tennis shoe back and forth in the gravel. Mrs. Weems who had cared for the girl ever since the death of Mrs. Parker, gazed at her sternly.

"Now do stop grieving!" she chided. "That's no way to act just because you're impatient and disappointed."

"But I've been disappointed three times now," Penny complained. "We planned on starting early and having a picnic lunch on the road. Dad promised faithfully—"

A car drove up to the curb at the front of the house. Penny sprang hopefully to her feet. However, it was not her father who had arrived. Instead, her chum, Louise Sidell, alighted and came running across the yard.

"Oh, I'm glad I'm not too late to say goodbye to you, Penny!" she cried. "How soon are you starting?"

"I'd like to know the answer to that one myself. Dad hasn't put in an appearance. He was due here at three o'clock."

"Why, I saw him about twenty minutes ago," Louise replied, turning to inspect the over-loaded sedan. "My, how did you accumulate so much luggage?"

Penny ignored the question to ask one of her own. "Where did you see, Dad, Lou?"

"Why, riding in a car." Louise's dark eyes sparkled mischievously as she added: "With a beautiful brunette too."

"You're joking."

"I am not. Your father was riding with Mrs. Deline. She's a widow, you know, and has lived in Riverview less than a month."

Mrs. Weems, who had overheard the conversation, came over to the steps.

"Mrs. Deline, did you say?" she inquired, slightly disturbed. "I've heard of her."

"And so have I!" declared Penny with biting emphasis. "Why, that woman would make the Merry Widow look like a dead number! She'd better not try to sink her hooks into Dad!"

"Penelope!" the housekeeper reproved sternly.

"Well, you know what everyone says—"

"Please don't repeat idle gossip," Mrs. Weems requested. "I'm sure Mrs. Deline is a very fine woman."

"She's the slickest serpent that ever free-wheeled into Riverview!" Penny said heatedly. "I saw her in action last week-end at the Country Club. Why, she simply went out of her way to cultivate any man who had an income of more than twenty-five thousand a year."

"Penny, your father is a sensible man," the housekeeper reproved. "Unfortunately, it's a quality I'm afraid you didn't inherit."

Louise, unhappy to have stirred up such a hornet's nest, said hastily: "Maybe it wasn't Mrs. Deline I saw. The car went by so fast."

"Oh, I'm not worried. Dad can handle a bigger package of dynamite than Mrs. Deline. It just makes me irritated because he doesn't get here."

Tossing her head, Penny crossed to the loaded automobile where she switched on the radio. She tuned it carelessly. After a moment a blurred voice blared forth:

"Attention Comrades!"

Penny turned quickly to glance at the dial, for she realized that she did not have the local station WZAM.

"Attention Comrades!" the announcer commanded again. "This is the Voice from the Cave."

There followed a strange jibberish of words which were in no language that Penny ever before had heard.

"Mrs. Weems! Louise!" she called excitedly. "I think I've tuned in an outlaw short wave station! Just listen!"

Louise and the housekeeper hastened over to the car. Penny tried desperately to tune the station in more clearly. Instead she lost it completely.

"Did you hear what that announcer said?" she

asked eagerly. "Most of it I couldn't understand. I'm sure it was in code!"

"Code!" Mrs. Weems exclaimed in amazement.

"I'm sure I didn't have one of the regular stations! It must have been a short wave broadcast beamed at a particular group of persons. The announcer began: 'Attention Comrades!' "

"Can't you tune in again?" Louise demanded.

Penny twisted the dial without success. She was still trying when a taxi cab drew up at the front door.

"There's your father now!" Louise declared.

"And see who's with him!" Penny added, craning her neck. "It *is* Mrs. Deline."

Mrs. Weems, decidedly flustered, hurriedly removed her apron. In an undertone she warned Penny to be polite to the unexpected visitor.

Mr. Parker, a tall, lean man with hair only touched by gray, stepped from the taxi. The woman he assisted was attractively slender, and dressed in an expensive tailored suit. Her face was cold and serene, but so striking that it commanded instant interest. Penny's spirits sagged as she observed that the widow came equipped with luggage.

"Now what?" she muttered.

Mr. Parker escorted Mrs. Deline across the yard, introducing her first to Mrs. Weems and then to the girls.

"Mrs. Deline is riding with us to Sunset Beach,"

he explained to Penny. "She intended to go by train but failed to get a reservation."

"Coaches are so unbearable," Mrs. Deline said in an affected drawl. "It was so nice of Mr. Parker to invite me to share your car."

"I'm afraid it may not be so pleasant for you," Penny replied. She tried to speak cordially but the words came in stiff little jerks. "There's not much room."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Parker. "Mrs. Deline will ride up front. Penny, you'll have to battle it out with the luggage."

By the time Mrs. Deline's suitcase and hat boxes were stowed away, there was indeed little room left in the rear seat for a passenger. Penny's face was very long. For weeks she had planned on a vacation trip with her father, and now all her plans had been shattered.

"Will you be staying long at Sunset Beach?" she asked the widow politely.

"Probably a week," Mrs. Deline replied. "I've engaged a suite at the Crystal Inn. I'm sure I couldn't endure a camping trip. Mosquitoes—hard beds—cooking over a camp fire—it all seems rather difficult to me."

"Oh, it will be fun to camp!"

"I'm not so certain of it myself." Mr. Parker assisted the widow into the front seat. "Penny, why

don't we ditch this camp stuff and try a hotel ourselves?"

"No!" answered Penny fiercely.

"It would be a far more sensible arrangement."

"But I don't want to be sensible," Penny argued. "We've planned on this trip for weeks, Dad."

"Oh, all right, if that's the way you feel about it," he gave in willingly enough. "Only I never did care much for the rough and tumble life myself. Are we ready to start?"

"Just a minute," Penny requested. "I have to get my pocketbook from the house."

She went indoors, her face as dark as a summer rain cloud. Mrs. Weems and Louise followed her in, coraling her in the kitchen.

"Now Penny, just a word of advise," the housekeeper cautioned. "Mrs. Deline seems like a very nice woman. I trust that you'll be pleasant to her."

"I don't see why Dad had to invite her! It's ruined everything!"

"Aren't you being selfish?"

"Maybe I am," said Penny. "But why should I be crammed back with the pots and pans and luggage while she sits up front with Dad?"

"Mrs. Deline is your guest."

"She's Dad's guest," Penny corrected. "Furthermore, I suspect she invited herself."

"Whatever you think, I hope you'll keep your

thoughts to yourself," Mrs. Weems said severely. "I'm really ashamed of you."

The deep scowl disappeared from Penny's face and she laughed. Wrapping her arms about the housekeeper's ample waist she squeezed until it hurt.

"I know I'm a spoiled brat," she admitted. "But don't worry. I'll pretend to like Mrs. Deline if it kills me."

"That's much better, Penny. At any rate, you'll not be troubled with her company long. You'll reach Sunset Beach by nightfall."

Penny made no reply. She turned to say goodbye to Louise.

"Wish you were going along," she said wistfully. "A vacation won't seem fun without you."

A staccato toot of the auto horn reminded Penny that her father and Mrs. Deline were waiting. Hurriedly she gathered up her purse.

"Have a nice time," Louise said, kissing her goodbye. "And don't let Mrs. Deline get in your hair."

Penny turned to make certain that Mrs. Weems was beyond hearing.

"Don't worry about that, Lou," she whispered. "Mrs. Deline's already in my hair. What I'm really worried about is keeping her from building a nest in it!"

CHAPTER

2

STORMY WEATHER

FOR AN hour the Parker car had rolled smoothly along the paved road enroute to Sunset Beach. In the back seat, firmly wedged between boxes and suitcases, Penny squirmed and suffered.

"How much farther, Dad?" she inquired, interrupting an animated conversation he was having with Mrs. Deline.

"Oh, about fifty miles," Mr. Parker tossed over his shoulder. "We can't make much time at thirty-five an hour."

"How about lunch somewhere along the road?"

"Well, should we take the time?" the publisher asked. He turned toward his companion. "What do you think, Mrs. Deline?"

"Picnics always seemed stupid to me," she replied in a bored manner. "Perhaps we'll find a nice tea house along the way."

"But Mrs. Weems prepared such a good lunch," Penny argued. "I thought—"

"We can use the food after we make camp," Mr. Parker decided briskly. "A warm meal will be much better."

Penny subsided into hurt silence. Since the party had left Riverview she felt that she had been pushed far into the background. Mrs. Deline had made no attempt to talk to her. On the other hand, the widow fairly hypnotized Mr. Parker with her dazzling smile and conversation.

"Dad," Penny began, determined to get in a word, "just before you came home this afternoon, something queer happened."

"That so?" he inquired carelessly.

"Yes, I turned on the radio, and a station I'd never heard before came in. The announcer said: 'Attention Comrades, this is the Voice from the Cave.' "

"Sounds like a juvenile radio serial."

"Oh, but it wasn't, Dad! I'm sure it was an outlaw station. Then the announcer spoke very rapidly in a language I'd never heard before. It really sounded like code."

"Sure you didn't imagine it? You know you do get ideas, Penny. Especially when you're on the prowl for a mystery to solve."

"Aren't children quaint?" Mrs. Deline laughed.

Penny's lips tightened, but by great effort of will

she kept silent. A child indeed! She knew now that Mrs. Deline disliked her and that they had launched an undeclared war.

"I heard the broadcast all right," she said. "For that matter, so did Mrs. Weems and Louise. But probably it's of no consequence."

The subject was dropped. It was stuffy in the closed car and Penny presently rolled down a window. Immediately Mrs. Deline protested that the wind was blowing her hair helter-skelter. At a stern glance from her father, Penny closed the window again, leaving only a tiny crack for air.

"All the way, please," requested Mrs. Deline.

"Penny, you're being very, very difficult," Mr. Parker added.

Penny rolled the window shut, but her blue eyes cast off little sparks of fire. As a rule, she was a very pleasant person, not in the least spoiled. In Riverview where she had lived for fifteen happy, eventful years, her friends were beyond count. Penny liked people and nearly everyone liked her. But for some reason, she and Mrs. Deline had taken an instant dislike to each other.

"Maybe I'm jealous," Penny thought ruefully. "I shouldn't be, but Dad's all I have."

Between Mr. Parker and his daughter there existed a deep bond of affection. Penny's mother was dead and the noted publisher had devoted himself to filling

the great void in the girl's life. He had given her companionship and taught her to think straight. Knowing that she was dependable, he allowed her more freedom than most girls her age were permitted.

Penny adored her father and seemingly had inherited his love of newspaper work. Upon various occasions she had helped him at the *Riverview Star*, writing and obtaining some of the paper's most spectacular front page stories. Only the past winter, following her father's severe illness, she had acted as editor of the *Star*, managing the paper entirely herself.

"And now Dad and Mrs. Deline treat me as if I were a child!" she reflected resentfully.

Though very much upset, Penny kept her thoughts to herself. Curling up with her head on a pile of blankets, she pretended to sleep.

The car went over a hard bump. Penny bounced and opened her eyes. She was surprised to see that it had grown quite dark. The automobile was moving in a wide curve between long rows of pine trees.

"What time is it?" she asked, pressing her face to the window.

"Not so late," replied her father. "We're running into a rain storm. Just our luck."

Dark clouds had entirely blotted out the late afternoon sun. Even as Mr. Parker spoke, several big raindrops splashed against the windshield.

Soon the rain came down in such a thick sheet that

the road ahead was obscured. Stopping suddenly for a crossroads traffic light, the car went into a slight skid. Mrs. Deline screamed in terror, and clutched Mr. Parker's arm.

"Oh, can't we stop somewhere?" she pleaded. "I'm so afraid we'll have an accident."

"Yes, we'll stop," Mr. Parker agreed. "The storm is certainly getting worse."

A short distance ahead the party glimpsed a group of buildings. One was a filling station and beside it stood a small three-story hotel and tea room.

"Doesn't look too bad," Mr. Parker commented, pulling up close to the door. "We'll have dinner and by that time the storm may be over."

While Penny and Mrs. Deline went into the tea-room, the publisher took the car next door to the filling station to have the tank refueled. He rejoined them soon, shaking the raindrops from his coat.

"It's coming down harder than ever," he reported. "And we still have a long drive ahead of us."

"Do you think we'll reach our camp site tonight, Dad?" Penny inquired anxiously.

"We'll be lucky to get to Sunset Beach. As for making camp, that's out of the question."

"Maybe it will stop raining soon," Penny ventured hopefully.

Mr. Parker ordered dinner for the party and an

hour was consumed in dining. The rain, however, showed no signs of slackening.

"We could go on—" Mr. Parker said thoughtfully. "Of course, the roads are slippery."

"Oh, please let's not venture out in this," Mrs. Deline pleaded before Penny could speak. "I know I am being silly, but I'm so afraid of an accident. Once I was in a car that overturned and I've never forgotten it."

"There's no great hurry," Mr. Parker replied. "If we can't reach Sunset Beach tonight, I suppose we could stay here."

Mrs. Deline did not comment upon the suggestion, but from the way she smiled, Penny was sure that the idea appealed to her. Taking her father aside, the girl urged him to try to drive on to Sunset Beach that night.

"Our vacation is so short, Dad. Even now we'll lose almost a day in setting up camp."

"We'll certainly push on if we can," he promised. "This storm complicates everything."

For two hours the rain fell steadily. With the prospects anything but improved, Mr. Parker made inquiry as to lodging for the night. From the hotel keeper he learned that rooms already were at a premium.

"We'll have to make up our minds soon," he re-

ported to Penny and Mrs. Deline. "If we wait much longer we'll probably find ourselves sleeping in the lobby."

"Then let's stay," the widow urged. "Please engage a room and a bath for me. Preferably one at the rear of the building away from the highway."

"I'm afraid you'll have no choice," Mr. Parker told her regretfully. "We'll have to take what we can get."

The publisher consulted with the hotel clerk, and returned to report that only two rooms remained available.

"You and Penny will have to share one together," he explained. "I hope you won't mind."

It was evident by the expression of Mrs. Deline's face that she minded a great deal. However, she consented to the arrangement and the luggage was taken upstairs. The door closed behind the bellboy. For the first time Penny and Mrs. Deline were left alone.

"Such a cheap, dirty hotel!" the widow exclaimed petulantly. "And I do hate to share a room with anyone."

Penny busied herself unpacking her over-night bag. Crossing to the window, she raised it half way.

"Do put that down!" Mrs. Deline ordered. "I detest air blowing directly on me."

Penny lowered the window.

Mrs. Deline smoked a cigarette, carelessly allowing the ashes to fall on the bed. Getting up, she moved nervously about the room.

"This place is so small it seems like a prison," she complained. "Why do you sit there and stare at me?"

"I didn't realize I was staring," Penny apologized. "If you'll excuse me, I'll go to bed."

Undressing quickly, she crawled beneath the covers. Mrs. Deline smoked still another cigarette and then began to prepare for bed. As she removed the jacket of her suit, Penny noticed that the woman wore a beautiful jade elephant pin.

"Why, what an attractive ornament!" she exclaimed. "Is it a locket or just a pin?"

"I bought it in China," the widow answered without replying to the question.

"In China! Have you been there?"

"Of course!" Mrs. Deline gave Penny an amused glance. Without removing the pin or offering to show it to the girl, she completed her preparations for bed.

Just at that moment there came a light tap on the door.

"Oh, Penny!" Mr. Parker called.

"Yes, Dad, what is it?" Penny leaped out of bed.

"I'm worried about the car keys," he called through the transom. "You didn't by chance see them after we left the dining room?"

"Why, yes," Penny reassured him. "You left them lying on the table. I picked them up and forgot to tell you. They're here on the dresser. I'll hand them out."

"No, never mind. Keep them. I was just afraid they were lost. Goodnight."

Mrs. Deline glanced curiously at the key ring on the dresser. She remarked that she had not seen Penny pick it up.

"You were talking to Dad at the time," the girl replied.

Leaving the keys on the dresser, she leaped into bed again and settled herself for a comfortable sleep. Mrs. Deline presently turned out the light and took the other bed. For a time Penny was annoyed by voices from the hallway, then all became quiet. She slept.

Much later Penny awoke. She stirred and rolled over. The rain had ceased and moonlight was flooding into the room. A beam fell directly across Mrs. Deline's bed, revealing a mass of crumpled sheets and covers.

Penny stared, scarcely believing her eyes. The bed was empty.

CHAPTER

3

A JADE GREEN CHARM

SITTING UP in bed, Penny gazed about the room. Mrs. Deline was not there and her clothes were gone from the chair where they had been placed earlier that night.

"Queer," mused the girl.

Jumping out of bed, she darted to the door. Though it had been carefully locked a few hours before, the latch now was off.

Thoroughly puzzled, Penny switched on a light and glanced carefully about. Mrs. Deline's suitcase remained in the closet, but coat and hat were missing. And then Penny made an even more disturbing discovery. The car keys were gone from the dresser!

"Why, I know I put those keys on the bureau just before I went to bed!" she told herself in dismay. "Now I wonder if that woman—" Ashamed of her thoughts, she muttered: "Guess I *am* a suspicious brat!"

Deeply mystified, she moved quickly to the window overlooking the parking lot and filling station. It was reassuring to see the Parker automobile standing where her father had left it earlier that night. But as she stood staring down into the dark, deserted yard, she was startled to observe a shadowy figure rounding a corner of the hotel.

"Mrs. Deline!" she recognized the woman.

Penny waited only long enough to see that the widow was walking straight toward the Parker sedan.

"She intends to steal it!" thought the girl. "Why else would she take the keys?"

Snatching dress and coat from a chair, Penny scrambled into them without taking time to remove her pajamas. She tucked up the unsightly legs of the garment and put on her shoes. Thus clad she ran downstairs through the semi-dark lobby to the side exit of the hotel.

As she reached the outside door, she heard the blast of an automobile engine.

"That's our car!" Penny thought, recognizing the sound of the running motor. "She'll get away before I can stop her!"

The engine, evidently cold, sputtered a moment, then died.

Hopeful that she might still get there in time, Penny raced across the parking lot. Reaching the car just

as it started to move backwards, she jerked open the door.

"Mrs. Deline!" she cried.

Startled, the woman released the clutch so suddenly that the motor died again.

"Where are you taking our car?" Penny demanded, sliding into the seat beside the widow.

The girl's unexpected arrival seemed to completely unnerve Mrs. Deline. She lost composure, but only for an instant. Lighting a cigarette, she gazed at Penny with cold disdain.

"I had intended to go for a little ride," she replied. "Any objections?"

The question placed Penny on the defensive. "You shouldn't have taken the car without asking Dad," she said stiffly. "We barely have enough gasoline to reach Sunset Beach."

"Oh, I had no thought of going far. I'll just drive a few miles and come back."

"At this time of night? It must be nearly two o'clock."

"I always enjoy night driving. Particularly if I am nervous and unable to sleep. Now run back to bed like a good child."

Penny did not like the widow's tone of voice. She liked it less that Mrs. Deline ignored her hint that the car was not to be used. More than ever she was con-

vinced that the woman had intended to steal the automobile.

"I'm sorry," she said firmly. "I must ask you not to take the car without Dad's permission."

"Well!" Mrs. Deline exclaimed indignantly. "You expect me to rap on your father's door at this time of night to ask if I may use the car!"

"I don't see why you need to use the car at all."

"Oh, you don't?" Mrs. Deline's tone was scornful. "Well, let me tell you this! I've already given you as much of an explanation as I intend to! I need the car."

"I thought you said you only intended to go for a little drive—to quiet your nerves," Penny reminded her.

"That's what I meant." Mrs. Deline tossed her cigarette through the open window and stepped on the car starter. "I intend to go too."

Penny, equally determined, switched off the ignition.

"Why, how dare you!" Mrs. Deline turned furiously upon the girl. "In all my life I never met such a spoiled child."

"I don't mean to be rude, but I can't allow you to take the car."

Mrs. Deline swung open the door on Penny's side of the seat. She reached as if to push the girl out of the car.

Just then a man stepped from one of the hotel garages. Obviously he had been listening to the conversation, for he deliberately approached the car.

"Anything wrong here?" he inquired.

Penny recognized one of the night hotel clerks. She began to tell him of the disagreement between herself and Mrs. Deline.

"This child doesn't know what she's talking about!" the widow declared irritably. "Mr. Parker doesn't mind if I use the car."

"Then please ask him!" Penny challenged.

"Why not allow me to do it for you," the hotel clerk offered. "Wait here and I'll call Mr. Parker. He can settle the entire matter."

"No, don't bother him," Mrs. Deline decided suddenly. "I've changed my mind anyhow. After such a commotion I wouldn't enjoy a ride."

"In any case, I'd prefer to call Mr. Parker," said the hotel man.

"Do," urged Penny in deep satisfaction. "We'll wait here."

"I'm going back to bed," Mrs. Deline announced, getting out of the car.

She followed the hotel clerk into the building. Left in possession of the car, Penny reparked it and locked the doors. Then, feeling a trifle uneasy, she sauntered into the hotel.

The lobby was deserted. Penny climbed the stairs,

and in the hallway leading to her room, met her father and the hotel clerk. Summoned from bed, Mr. Parker garbed in dressing gown and slippers, looked more annoyed than alarmed.

"Penny, what is this I hear?" he inquired. "I can't get the straight of the story."

Penny drew a deep breath. "Well, it was this way, Dad. I awakened and discovered that Mrs. Deline had disappeared with the car keys."

"Mrs. Deline!"

"Yes, I think she meant to steal the car. But she explained that she only intended to borrow it for a night ride."

"Anything wrong about that?"

Penny regarded her father in blank amazement.

"Why, Dad, would you borrow another person's car without asking?"

"No, but Mrs. Deline probably didn't stop to consider the matter. No doubt she was too thoughtful to awaken you."

"Thoughtful, my left eye! Dad, I'm sure Mrs. Deline meant to steal the car. Either that or she had a very important appointment—a meeting with someone she wasn't willing to tell us about."

"Nonsense!" Mr. Parker exclaimed impatiently. "Penny, you made a serious mistake in refusing to allow Mrs. Deline to use the car. She is our guest and I'm afraid you were rude."

"But Dad—"

"You must apologize to her at once."

Penny did not answer for a moment. She bent to tie her flapping shoe strings and took her time at the task. When she straightened, she said quietly:

"All right, Dad. If you say so, I'll apologize. But I don't think I was wrong."

"We'll not discuss it now, Penny. Suppose you turn the car keys over to me and go to your room."

Penny gave up the keys and without another word went down the hall. Tears stung her eyes, but she brushed them away. She knew she had been unpleasant to Mrs. Deline. Nevertheless, she felt that her father had not been entirely just in his attitude.

Entering the bedroom, she hesitated before turning on the light. Mrs. Deline had undressed and was in bed. She ignored the girl.

"I—I guess I made a bad mistake," Penny began awkwardly. "I shouldn't have been so rude."

Mrs. Deline rolled over in bed. Her dark eyes flashed and she made no effort to hide her dislike.

"So you admit it?" she asked. "Well, we will forget the matter. Do not speak of it to me again."

In silence Penny undressed and hung up her coat and dress. As she prepared to snap out the light, she noticed that Mrs. Deline still wore the jade elephant charm about her neck.

"Aren't you afraid you'll break the chain?" she

asked before she thought. "You forgot to take it off."

Mrs. Deline raised herself on an elbow, fairly glaring at Penny.

"Will you kindly worry about your own affairs?" she asked insolently. "I've had about all I can take from you in one night."

"But I didn't mean anything personal."

"Good night!" said Mrs. Deline with emphasis.

Penny turned out the light and crept into her own bed. She felt beaten and hurt. It was easy to understand why Mrs. Deline disliked her, but her own attitude was bewildering.

"I distrusted the woman the instant I met her," she reflected. "Perhaps I had no reason for it at first. Now I'm not so sure."

Penny rolled over to face the window. Moonlight was flooding into the room. In the diffused light the girl could see Mrs. Deline plainly. The woman had propped herself up in bed and was fingering the jade green elephant charm which hung on its slender chain. Though Penny could not be certain, she thought the lid of the figure lay open and that Mrs. Deline quickly snapped it shut.

"Good night, Mrs. Deline," she ventured, still trying to make amends.

The widow did not answer. Instead she turned her back and pretended to sleep.

CHAPTER

4

NO CAMPING ALLOWED

BREAKFAST THE next morning was a trying ordeal for Penny. Over the coffee cups Mr. Parker apologized to Mrs. Deline for what he termed his daughter's "inexcusable behavior."

The widow responded graciously, quite in contrast to her attitude of the previous night. Without saying much, she conveyed the impression that Penny had been completely in the wrong, and was in fact, a spoiled child who must be humored.

The journey on to Sunset Beach was equally unpleasant. Mr. Parker and Mrs. Deline seemed so absorbed in animated conversation, that they scarcely spoke or noticed Penny. Wedged between the luggage and the camping equipment, she indulged in self pity.

"At least we'll get rid of Mrs. Deline when we reach Sunset Beach," she cheered herself.

Presently the car rounded a wide curve in the road,

and Penny caught her first glimpse of the seashore. Big waves were rolling in, washing an endless stretch of white sand.

"Oh, isn't it beautiful!" she exclaimed, brightening. "I wish we were camping right on the beach instead of in the State Forest."

"I fear the authorities wouldn't permit that," Mr. Parker laughed. "By the way, Penny, is your heart really set on this camping trip?"

Penny gave him a quick look. "Yes, it is, Dad," she said briefly. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, I was thinking that we'd be a lot more comfortable at one of the big hotels. We'd be right on the beach and—"

"Oh, I was just talking when I said I'd like to camp on the beach," Penny cut in. "I'd like the State Forest much better."

"Then we'll go there just as we planned," Mr. Parker said, sighing. "But you know I never was cut out for a rough and tumble life, Penny. I'm far from sure I'll make a good camper."

The car rolled on along the ocean road, presently entering the little village of Sunset Beach. Normally a tourist center, the town now was practically deserted, and the Parkers had chosen it because it was within easy driving distance of Riverview. Nearly all of the fine hotels along the water front were closed. However, the Crystal Inn remained in opera-

tion, and it was there that Mrs. Deline had engaged a suite.

The car swung into the driveway and halted in front of the hotel. An attendant did not come immediately so Mr. Parker himself unloaded the widow's luggage. Mrs. Deline gave him a dazzling smile as she bade him goodbye.

"Oh, we'll not say goodbye just yet," Mr. Parker corrected. "Penny and I will camp only a short distance away. We'll run down to the beach often."

"Do," urged Mrs. Deline. "I have no friends here and I'll be happy to see you."

Mr. Parker carried the widow's luggage into the hotel. While he was absent, Penny moved up to the front seat. She tuned in a radio program, listening to it with growing impatience. Finally her father sauntered out of the hotel.

"I nearly gave you up," Penny remarked pointedly.

Mr. Parker slid behind the steering wheel and started the car. When they were driving along the ocean front road he said quietly:

"Penny, I can't imagine what has come over you lately. You're not in the least like the little girl who was my pal and companion. Why have you been so unkind to Mrs. Deline?"

"I just don't like her," Penny said flatly. "Furthermore, I distrust her."

"You've acted very stupid and silly."

"I'm sorry if you're ashamed of me," Penny replied glaring at her own reflection in the car mirror. "At any rate, I saved the car for you."

"That accusation was ridiculous, Penny. Mrs. Deline is a wealthy woman who could buy herself a dozen cars in ordinary times. She merely gave in to a sudden whim."

"Just what do you know about Mrs. Deline, Dad?"

"Not a great deal," Mr. Parker admitted. "I met her at the club. She served as a special War correspondent in China, I believe. She has traveled all over the world and speaks a half dozen languages."

"I never heard of her until she came to Riverview," Penny said with a sniff. "Nor did I ever see any of her writing in print. If you ask me, she's a phony."

"Let's not discuss the subject further," Mr. Parker replied, losing patience. "When you're older, I hope you'll learn to be more gracious and charitable."

Penny subsided into hurt silence. In all her life she could recall only a few occasions when her father had spoken so sternly to her. Close to tears, she studied the tumbling surface of the ocean with concentrated interest.

In silence the Parkers drove through the village, stopping at a filling station to inquire the way to Rhett State Forest. Supplies were purchased at one of the stores, and by that time it was noon. At Mr. Parker's suggestion they stopped at a roadside inn for lunch.

After that they drove on a half mile beyond the outskirts of Sunset Beach, past a tall lighthouse to the end of the pavement.

"We follow a dirt road for a quarter of a mile to Bradley Knoll," Mr. Parker said, consulting directions he had jotted down on an envelope.

"A mud road, you mean," Penny corrected, peering ahead at the narrow, twisting highway. "It really rained here last night."

The car had no chains. Not without misgiving, Mr. Parker drove off the pavement onto the slippery road. The car wallowed about and at times skidded dangerously.

"Once we reach the State park we'll have gravel roads," Penny said, studying a map.

"*If* we get there," Mr. Parker corrected.

Barely had he spoken than the car went out of control. It took a long skid, turned crosswise in the road, and then the rear wheels slipped into a deep ditch. Opening the car door, Penny saw that the car was bogged down to the hub caps.

Mr. Parker tried without success to pull out of the ditch. Alighting, he inspected the rear wheels which had spun deeper and deeper into the mud.

"Not a chance to get out of here without help," he said crossly. "I'll have to find someone to give us a hand."

Farther down the road stood a weatherbeaten farm-

house. Penny offered to go there to summon help, but her father insisted upon doing it himself. He presently returned with a farmer and a small tractor. After considerable difficulty the car was pulled out of the ditch.

"How much do I owe you?" Mr. Parker asked the man.

"Ten dollars."

The amount seemed far too high for the service rendered, but Mr. Parker paid it without comment. His shoes were caked with mud, and so were the trouser legs of his suit. Only by an effort of will did he keep his temper under control.

"Figurin' on camping in the Rhett Forest?" the farmer asked Mr. Parker.

"That's right. Is it much farther?"

"Only a little piece down the road. You'll strike gravel at the next corner. You can make it if you're careful. I don't calculate you'll have much fun camping in the Park though."

"Why not?" asked Penny.

"We've had a lot o' rain lately. The mosquitoes are bitin' something fierce. And the ground's mighty damp."

"We have a floor to our tent," Penny said optimistically. "I think camping will be fun. I've always wanted to try it."

The farmer started the tractor. "Then don't let me discourage you," he shrugged. "So long."

Mr. Parker rejoined Penny in the car. "Why not call this whole thing off?" he suggested. "We could go to the hotel and—"

"No, Dad! You promised me!"

"All right, Penny, if that's the way you feel, but I know we're asking for punishment."

By careful driving the Parkers reached the gravel road without mishap. At the entrance to the Rhett Park area they were stopped by a pleasant, middle-aged forest ranger who took down the license number of the car.

"Be careful about your camp fire," he instructed. "Only last week several acres of timber were destroyed at Alton. We're not certain whether it was started by a camper or was a case of sabotage. In any case, one can't be too careful."

"We will be," promised Mr. Parker.

"Camp only in the designated sites," the ranger added. "I'll be around later on to see how you're getting along."

Once beyond the gateway arch, Penny's sagging spirits began to revive. The road curled lazily between dense masses of timber fringed by artistic old-fashioned rail fences. Numerous signs pointed to trails that invited exploration.

"Oh, Dad, it's really nice here!" she cried. "We'll have a wonderful time!"

Presently the car came to an open space with picnic tables. There was a picturesque spot beside a rocky brook which looked just right for a camp site.

"Let's pitch our tent here!" pleaded Penny. "You set it up while I cook supper."

Mr. Parker unloaded the car and went to work with a will hammering the metal stakes of the umbrella tent. Penny busied herself sorting pots and pans and trying to get the gasoline stove started. Despite her best efforts she could not induce it to burn.

In the meantime, Mr. Parker was having his own set of troubles. Three of the tent stakes were missing. Twice he put up the umbrella framework, only to have the entire structure collapse upon his head.

"Penny, come here and help me!" he called. "I've had about enough of this!"

Penny ran to her father's rescue, pulling the canvas from his head and shoulders. By working together they finally got the tent set up. Another half hour was required to put up the cots and make them.

"Well, that job is done," Mr. Parker sighed, collapsing on one of the beds. "Such a life!"

"Dad, I hate to bother you," Penny apologized, "but I can't start the stove. Do you mind looking at it?"

Grumbling a bit, Mr. Parker went to tinker with the stove. Three-quarters of an hour slipped away before he succeeded in coaxing a bright flame.

"All this work has given me a big appetite for supper," he announced. "What are we having, Penny?"

"Steaks."

"Sounds fine."

"I forgot the salt though," Penny confessed, slapping the meat into a frying pan.

The burner was too hot. While Penny had her back turned and was opening a can of beans, the steaks began to scorch. Mr. Parker tried to rescue them. In his haste he seized the hot skillet handle and burned his hands.

"Oh, Dad, I'm so sorry!" Penny sympathized. "I guess the steaks are practically ruined too."

"Anything else to eat?" the publisher asked, nursing his blistered hand.

"Beans."

"Beans!" Mr. Parker repeated with bitter emphasis. "Oh, well—dish them up."

Penny was serving the food on tin plates when a car drove up and stopped. A ranger climbed out and walked over to the tent.

"What's the idea, camping here?" he demanded. "Can't you read signs?"

"We didn't see any sign," said Penny.

The ranger pointed to one in plain sight tacked on the trunk of a tree. It read:

"Restricted Area. No Camping Permitted."

"You can't stay here," the ranger added. "You'll have to move on."

Penny and her father gazed at each other in despair. After all the work they had done, it didn't seem as though they could break camp.

"Any objections if we stay here until morning?" Mr. Parker requested. "We've had a pretty hard time of it getting established."

The ranger looked sympathetic but unmoved.

"Sorry," he said curtly. "Regulations are regulations. You may finish your supper if you like, then you must move on. The regular camp site is a quarter of a mile farther up the road."

CHAPTER

5

OVER THE AIR

THE RANGER'S order so discouraged Penny and her father that they lost all zest for supper. Too weary for conversation, they tore up the beds, repacked the dishes, and pulled the tent stakes.

"I've not worked so hard in years," Mr. Parker sighed. "What a mistake to call this a vacation!"

"Perhaps it won't be so hard once we get settled," Penny said hopefully. "After all, we've had more than our share of bad luck."

Bad luck, however, continued to follow the campers. In the gathering darkness, Penny and her father had trouble finding the specified camp ground. It was impossible to drive a car into the cleared space, so they were forced to carry all of the heavy luggage and equipment from the automobile to the camp site.

By that time it was quite dark. Mr. Parker misplaced one of the tent stakes and could not find it without a lengthy search. As he finally drove it in, he hammered his thumb instead of the metal pin.

"Drat it all! I've had enough of this!" he muttered irritably. "Penny, why not give it up—"

"Oh, no, Dad!" Penny cut in quickly. "Once we get the tent up again, we'll be all right. Here, I'll hold the flashlight so you can see better."

Finally the tent was successfully staked down, though Mr. Parker temporarily abandoned the idea of putting up the front porch. Penny set up the cots again and made the beds.

"Hope you packed plenty of woolen blankets," Mr. Parker commented, shivering. "It will be cold tonight."

Penny admitted that she had brought only two thin ones for each bed. "I didn't suppose it could get so cold on a summer night," she confessed ruefully.

Worn by his strenuous labors, Mr. Parker climbed into the closed car to smoke a cigar. Penny, finding the dark tent lonesome, soon joined him there. She switched on the car radio, tuning in an orchestra. Presently it went off the air so she dialed another station. A strange jargon of words which could not be understood, accosted her ears.

"Hold that, Penny!" exclaimed Mr. Parker.

"What station can it be?" Penny speculated, peering at the luminous dial. "It sounds like a short wave broadcast. Must be a station off its wave band."

She and her father listened intently to the speaker

who had a resonant, baritone voice. Not a word of the broadcast could they understand. Obviously a message was being sent in code.

"Dad, that sounds like the same station I heard yesterday!" Penny broke in. "Where can it be located?"

"I'd like to know myself."

Penny glanced quickly at her father. His remark, she thought, had definite significance. Before she could question him, the strange jargon ceased. The deep baritone voice concluded in plain, slightly accented English: "This is the Voice from the Cave, signing off until tomorrow night. Stand by, Comrades!"

"That was no regular station," Penny declared, puzzled. "But what was it?"

Mr. Parker reached over to turn off the panel switch. "It was an outlaw station," he said quietly. "The authorities have been after it for weeks."

"How did you learn about it?"

"Through various channels. Most outlaw radio stations can be traced quite easily by the use of modern radio-detecting devices. The enemy agent who operates this station is a particularly elusive fellow. Just when the police are sure they have him, he moves to another locality."

Penny was silent a moment and then she said:

"You seem to know quite a bit about this mysterious Voice, Dad."

"Naturally I've been interested in the case. If the police catch the fellow it will make a good story for the *Star*."

"Where is the station thought to be located, Dad?"

"Oh, it moves nightly. The fellow obviously has a portable broadcasting outfit."

"But isn't the general locality known?"

Mr. Parker smiled as he knocked ashes from his cigar.

"Authorities seem to think that it may be somewhere near here. Sunset Beach has countless caves, you know."

"Really?" The information excited Penny. "You never told me that before, Dad. And I suspect that you're keeping a lot of other secrets from me too!"

"Sunset Beach's caves are no secret. They're part of the tourist attraction."

"All the same you never mentioned them, Dad. I thought it was odd that you chose this place for a vacation. Now I'm beginning to catch on."

Mr. Parker pretended not to understand.

"Isn't it true that you came here to do a bit of investigation work?" Penny pursued the subject relentlessly.

"Now don't try to pin me down," Mr. Parker laughed. "Suppose we just say we came here for a vacation."

Penny eyed her father quizzically. From the way

he sidestepped her questions she was certain that he had more than a casual interest in the outlaw radio station.

"Dad, will you let me help you?" she pleaded eagerly.

"Help me?" Mr. Parker joked. "Why, you seem to think that I'm a Government investigator in disguise!"

"You don't deny that you came here largely because of your interest in that station?"

"Well, I may be a tiny bit interested. But don't jump to conclusions, young lady! It doesn't necessarily follow that I have set out to track down any enemy agent single handed." Mr. Parker brought the discussion to an end by opening the car door. "I'm dead tired, Penny. If you'll excuse me, I'll turn in."

After her father had gone to the tent, Penny remained for a while in the car. Soberly she stared at the stars and thought over what she had learned.

"I don't care what Dad says," she reflected, "he came here to find that radio station! But maybe, just maybe, I'll beat him to it!"

CHAPTER

6

BREAKFAST BLUES

PENNY AWOKE next morning to find the tent cold and damp. She rolled over on the hard cot and moaned with pain. Every muscle in her battered body felt as if it had been twisted into a knot.

Swinging her feet to the canvas floor, she pulled away the curtain to peer at her father's cot. It was empty.

"Guess I've overslept," she thought. "Hope Dad's started breakfast."

Penny dressed quickly, cringing as she pulled on damp shirt and shorts. Dew lay heavy upon the tent and the grass outside was saturated. She walked gingerly as she picked her way toward the parked car.

Mr. Parker had set up a portable table nearby and was tinkering with the gasoline stove. He was unshaven and looked very much out of sorts.

"Hi, Dad!" Penny greeted him with as much cheer

as she could muster. "What are we having for breakfast?"

"Nothing, so far as I can see! This stove is on strike again. I've tried for half an hour to get it started."

Penny climbed into the car to use the mirror. The sight of her face horrified her. One cheek was blotched with ugly red mosquito bites, there were dark circles under her eyes, and her hair hung in strings.

"If anyone ever gets me on another camping trip I'll be surprised!" Mr. Parker exclaimed. He slammed the stove down on the table. "I'm through monkeying with this contrary beast!"

"Oh, Dad, such a temper," Penny chided, giggling despite her own discouragement.

"Suppose you suggest how we're to eat."

"Well, there's cold breakfast food with canned milk." Penny burrowed deep in a box of supplies stored in the car. "Two soft bananas. No coffee, I'm afraid."

"Wonderful!" Mr. Parker said grimly. "Well, bring on the bird food."

Penny set the table and dished up the dry breakfast cereal.

"At least we have beautiful scenery," she remarked as she sat down to the dismal repast with her father. "Just look at those grand old trees."

"The place is all right. It's camping that has me tied in a knot. Now at the Crystal Inn we could be comfortable—right on the beach too."

"No," Penny said, though not very firmly. "We'll like it here after we get adjusted."

"Need any supplies today?" Mr. Parker asked abruptly.

"Yes, we'll have to have fresh meat and milk. I forgot salt too and bread."

"I'll drive down to Sunset Beach and get the things. May as well take the stove along too and try to have it repaired."

"That might be a good idea," Penny admitted, though with reluctance. "Don't be gone long, will you? I thought we might explore some of the trails."

"Oh, there's plenty of time for that."

Mr. Parker was noticeably cheerful as he stowed the portable stove in the car and drove away. Not without misgiving Penny watched him go. She remained somewhat troubled as she washed the breakfast dishes at the brook and struggled with the beds. The camping trip hadn't worked out as she had hoped and expected. So far it had been all work and no fun.

"Dad was up to something when he skipped out of here so fast," she mused. "Wonder why he doesn't come back?"

The sun rose high above the trees, drying the grass

and tent. Penny went for a short hike in the woods. She returned to find that her father still had not returned.

Just then a car rattled up the twisting road. Recognizing the same ranger who had caused so much trouble the previous night, Penny prepared herself for further blows. However, the government man was all smiles as he pulled up not far from the umbrella tent.

"Just dropped by to see if you're getting along all right," he greeted her in a friendly way. "Everything Okay?"

"I wouldn't venture such a rash statement as that," Penny answered, her face downcast.

Because the ranger, whose name was Bill Atkins, seemed to have a genuine interest, she found herself telling him all about her troubles.

"Why, you've not had a decent meal since you came here!" he exclaimed, climbing out of the car. "Maybe I can help you."

"Can you wave a magic wand and produce hot food?"

"We'll see," laughed the ranger. "Gasoline stoves are more bother than they're worth in my opinion."

As Penny watched in amazed admiration he built a good fire which soon made a bed of glowing cherry red coals.

"How about a nice pan of fish fried to a crisp brown?" the ranger tempted her. "I caught a string of them this morning. Beauties!"

From the car he brought a basket of fat trout, already dressed and ready for cooking. Without asking Penny for anything, he wrapped them in corn meal, salted each fish and let it sizzle in hot butter.

"Do you always travel with your car equipped like a kitchen cabinet?" Penny joked. Crouching beside the fire, she barely could take her eyes from the food.

"Not always," the ranger laughed. "I've been on an overnight trip. Usually have the fixings of a meal with me though."

While the fish slowly sizzled, Bill put on a pot of coffee and fried potatoes. He accomplished everything with such ease that Penny could only watch dumbfounded.

"Guess you and your father considered me an old crab last night," he remarked. "Sometimes we hate to enforce the rules, but we have to treat everyone alike. If we allowed folks to camp wherever they pleased the danger of forest fire would be greatly increased."

"You're right, of course. Have you had any fires this season?"

"Not here." Deftly the ranger dished up the potatoes and crisply browned fish. "Plenty of them far-

ther South. Not all caused by carelessness of campers either."

Penny was quick to seize upon the remark. "Sabotage?" she questioned.

"That's what we think," the ranger nodded. He poured two cups of steaming, black coffee. "Fact is, enemy agents have made quite a few attempts to set fire to our forests. Nearly always they're caught, but that doesn't mean we dare let up our vigilance."

Penny ate every morsel of the food, praising the ranger highly for his cooking ability.

"I wish Dad could have had some of this fish," she added. "He went down to Sunset Beach for supplies and for some reason hasn't returned."

"I'll have to be on the road myself," the ranger declared, getting up from the ground. "I'm due in town at twelve o'clock and it's nearly that now."

"You're driving to Sunset Beach?"

"Yes, want to ride along?"

Penny debated briefly. "Wait until I get my coat," she requested. "It's lonesome here alone. Anyway, I want to learn what's keeping Dad."

The park road had dried considerably, but even so the car skidded from side to side until it reached the paved highway. At Sunset Beach, the ranger dropped Penny off at the postoffice. Rather at a loss to know what to do with herself, she wandered about the half-

deserted streets in search of her father. He was not at any of the stores, nor did inquiry reveal his whereabouts.

"Perhaps he's sunning himself on the beach," she thought.

A boardwalk led over the dunes to the water front. The tide was at ebb, revealing a long, wide stretch of white sand strewn with shells and seaweed. Penny paused to gaze meditatively upon the wind-swept sea. For a time she watched the waves break and spill their foam on the sandy shore. Then she walked slowly on toward the imposing Crystal Inn.

Approaching the private beach area, Penny met only a few persons, mostly soldiers on furlough with their girls. There were no bathers for a sharp, cool wind blew off the water.

"Sunset Beach is nice," thought Penny, "but it's lonesome."

At the Crystal Inn there was more activity. Tennis courts were in use and so was the swimming pool. Penny circled the well-kept grounds, not intending to enter the building. However, as she drew near, her attention was drawn to the flagstone terrace overlooking the formal garden. Though it was set with tables there were not many diners.

Suddenly Penny stopped short, scarcely believing her eyes. At one of the tables near the stone railing sat her father with Mrs. Deline.

CHAPTER

7

THE BEARDED STRANGER

PENNY'S FIRST thought upon seeing her father and Mrs. Deline was to steal quietly away. Then amazement and injury gave way to a feeling of indignation. Perhaps her father had a perfect right to lunch with Mrs. Deline, but it was inconsiderate of him to so completely forget his own daughter.

"I might just as well be an orphan!" Penny sighed. "Well, we'll see!"

Stiffly she marched across the lawn to the railed-in hotel veranda. Her father saw her coming. His look of surprise changed to one of guarded welcome.

"Come up and have lunch with us," he invited. "The food here is quite an improvement on what we've been having at camp."

Penny could find no outside entranceway to the terrace. To Mrs. Deline's horror and her father's amusement, she climbed over the stone railing.

"Dad," Penny began, ignoring the widow except

for a curt nod, "I was just about ready to get out a search warrant for you."

Mr. Parker drew another chair to the table for his daughter. Her hair was none too well combed, she wore no stockings, and the coat did not entirely cover her camp costume. By contrast Mrs. Deline was perfectly turned out in tailored tweed suit with a smart little hat of feathers. Though the woman said nothing, her gaze was scornful as she appraised Penny.

"What shall I order for you?" Mr. Parker asked, signaling a waiter.

"Nothing, thank you." Penny was coldly polite. "I had a very fine lunch at camp, thanks to one of the rangers."

"I'm sorry I didn't get back," Mr. Parker apologized. "It took a long while to have the stove repaired. Then I met Mrs. Deline and—"

"Oh, I understand," Penny broke in. "The point is, when, if ever, are you coming back to camp?"

"Why, right now I suppose. We've finished our luncheon."

The waiter had come to the table. Mr. Parker asked for the bill, paid it, and arose. As he bade Mrs. Deline goodbye, he remarked that he probably would see her again soon.

Walking to the hotel parking lot where Mr. Parker had left the car, neither he nor Penny had much to

say. Not until they were driving through the village was the subject of Mrs. Deline mentioned.

"I don't see why you can't be a bit nicer to her," Mr. Parker commented. "You scarcely spoke a word to her."

"Did she say anything to me?"

"Well, I don't recall."

"I've treated Mrs. Deline just as well as she treats me!" Penny defended herself. "I'll admit I don't like her."

"And you show it too."

"Maybe I do, but she has no business taking so much of your time."

"So that's where the shoe pinches," chuckled Mr. Parker. "My little girl is jealous."

"The very idea!"

"Mrs. Deline is brilliant—a highly educated woman and I enjoy talking to her," Mr. Parker said thoughtfully. "I assure you it's no more serious than that."

Penny moved close to her father and squeezed his arm.

"We've been pals for such a long while," she said wistfully. "If anything ever should come between us—"

"Penny, you're positively morbid!" her father interrupted. "Of course nothing ever will come between us! Now let's talk of more cheerful subjects."

"Such as?"

"I've been thinking, Penny. You need a friend, someone to pal around with."

"You're the only friend I need, Dad."

"I mean someone your own age, Penny. Why not send for Louise Sidell? I'll gladly pay her train fare."

"It would be fun having Lou here."

"Then it's settled. We'll send a wire now." Mr. Parker turned the car around and drove to the local telegraph office.

Before Penny could change her mind, the message was sent. Not until long after she and her father had returned to the park did it occur to her that unwittingly she might have fashioned her own undoing. Though camping would be far more interesting with Louise to share her experiences, it also would give her father added opportunity to see Mrs. Deline.

"Maybe he didn't think of that angle," Penny reflected uneasily. "I'll keep it to myself."

The following day Mr. Parker spent the entire day in camp. With the gasoline stove in working order, hot meals were prepared though not without endless effort. There were dishes to wash, beds to make, and by the time the tasks were done, neither Penny nor her father had any energy left for hiking.

The second day was much easier. However, with more free time, Mr. Parker became increasingly restless. He missed his morning paper and was dissatis-

fied with the skimpy news reports that came in over the radio. Penny was not surprised when he mentioned that he would walk down to Sunset Beach.

"Mind if I go with you?" Penny asked quickly.

"Of course not," her father answered. "Why should I?"

At Sunset Beach a call at the local telegraph office disclosed a message for Penny which had been held for lack of an address. The wire was from Louise and read:

"ARRIVING AT SUNSET BEACH THURSDAY ON THE 12:30 PLANE. HOLD EVERYTHING."

"Thursday!" Penny cried, offering the telegram to her father. "That's tomorrow! My, will I be glad to see Lou! This place has been like a morgue without her."

"I imagine the town will brighten up quite a bit within the next few days," Mr. Parker said, a twinkle in his eye. "In fact, Louise may not be the only new arrival."

"Is someone else coming to see us?"

Mr. Parker would not answer her many questions. "Wait and see," he teased.

Since arriving at Sunset Beach Penny had been eager to visit the lighthouse located on Crag Point. Noticing that the tide was low, she suggested to her father that they go there together.

"Too long a walk," he complained. "You run along by yourself. I'll sun myself on the beach."

Leaving her father, Penny started off alone. The sun was warm and there were a number of bathers splashing about in the surf. A long row of picturesque cottages lined the water front. They thinned out as she went farther up the beach, and presently there were no habitations, only desolate, wind-blown sand.

Midway to the lighthouse, Penny met a man of early middle age who carried fishing rod and creel. He stared at her, hesitated, then paused to speak.

"I notice you're going toward Crag Point," he remarked pleasantly. "Are you a stranger to this locality?"

Penny admitted that she was.

"Then perhaps you haven't been told that the Point is a dangerous place to be at high tide."

"No, I hadn't heard."

"The Point is very nearly covered at that time," the stranger explained. "There's no danger at the present moment, of course."

"How long will I have here?"

"Oh, several hours," the stranger replied. "There's no cause for alarm if you just keep watch of the tide."

Penny thanked the stranger and walked on toward the lighthouse. The structure rose to a height of

seventy-five feet above the beach and was reached by means of a narrow little iron stairway.

No one was about the premises as Penny approached. However, as she started up the iron steps, a door far above her head opened. A burly, stout man whose face was browned by wind and sun, peered down at her.

"You can't come up here!" he shouted. "No visitors are allowed!"

"Oh," Penny murmured, retreating a step. "I didn't know. I only wanted to see the tower."

"No visitors," the keeper of the light repeated. "War regulations."

The rule seemed a reasonable one, but after such a long hike, Penny was disappointed. Walking back to the main section of the beach, she looked about for her father. He had disappeared.

"I'll bet a cookie he's at the Crystal Inn!" she thought indignantly.

But Penny could not find her father there nor at any other place along the water front. After an hour's search she decided that he must have returned to camp. Returning there, she approached the tent, noticing that the flap was closed, though not buttoned as she had left it.

"Dad must be here," she thought.

Drawing nearer she could see movement within the tent as someone brushed against the canvas walls.

"Oh, Dad!" she called.

There was no answer. But the next instant a man in rough garments and straw hat rushed out of the tent. Penny never before had set eyes upon him. She was so astonished that she gained only a fleeting impression of the bearded stranger. Seeing her, he thrust some object beneath his coat and fled into the woods.

CHAPTER

8

KEEPER OF THE LIGHT

RECOVERING FROM astonishment, Penny darted to the tent and jerked open the flap. The beds had been torn apart. Her purse, hidden beneath the pillow, was gone. Suitcases lay open on the canvas floor.

"That man was a thief!" she thought angrily.

Too late, she tried to determine which direction he had taken. She could hear no sound of crackling leaves or running feet.

"He's lying low," she told herself. "No use chasing him. I never could find him among the trees."

Thoroughly incensed, she went back to the disordered tent. A preliminary check revealed that besides the pocketbook, a pair of her father's shoes and a sweater had been taken.

"Lucky I didn't have much money in my purse," Penny congratulated herself. "It was a good leather pocketbook though, and I hate to lose it."

Going outside, she discovered other losses. The

supply of groceries had been ransacked. Bread was gone, several oranges and a tin of cold meat.

"That fellow was hungry," Penny reflected. "Probably some shiftless person who isn't willing to work for a living."

Entering the tent again, she busied herself making the beds and repacking the suitcases. As she finished the task, she heard footsteps outside. Fearful that the thief had returned, she jerked open the canvas flap. It was her father who had arrived.

"Oh, Dad, I'm glad you're back!" she exclaimed, rushing out to meet him. "We've been robbed!"

"What?"

Penny told him how she had frightened away the bearded stranger.

"That's bad," Mr. Parker said, frowning. "I didn't suppose there was another camper within miles of us."

"This man didn't look like a camper, Dad. He wore dirty, mussed clothing and a beard of at least a week's growth."

"How old a fellow?"

"Why, he looked young to me. And he ran like a young person."

"We'll report it to the ranger," Mr. Parker said, entering the tent to check over his belongings. "Probably never will get any of our things back though."

"The ranger may know who the fellow is, Dad."

"That's possible," Mr. Parker admitted. "Penny, I'm glad Louise is coming tomorrow. I certainly don't like the idea of your remaining here in camp alone."

"Then why don't you stay with me?" Penny countered instantly.

"Well, I'm planning on being rather busy."

"With Mrs. Deline."

"Penny, you're impossible!"

"Weren't you with her today? I looked everywhere for you."

"Mrs. Deline and I did go for a little walk. No harm in that, is there?"

"It all depends upon your viewpoint," Penny said loftily. "Personally, I consider her about as harmless as a Grade A rattler!"

"Penny, enough of such talk!"

"Okay," she returned grimly, "but never say I didn't warn you."

"I was about to tell you," Mr. Parker resumed, "that I expect to be busy the next few days helping local authorities trace that outlaw radio station we heard on the air."

"Oh!"

"In fact, Army experts are being sent here to aid in the work. My days will be pretty well tied up."

"I'm sorry, Dad," Penny said contritely. "Naturally I thought—"

"I'm afraid your trouble is that you don't stop to think," Mr. Parker lectured. "Please, will you forget Mrs. Deline?"

"I promise not to bother you about her again, Dad."

"Good!" Mr. Parker awkwardly patted his daughter's hand. "I realize you've had an unpleasant time of it so far, Penny. But things should pick up after Louise arrives."

"And that other surprise you hinted about?"

"Oh, you'll have to wait and see," Mr. Parker smiled. "However, I promise you that what's coming really will prove a pleasant surprise."

Though Penny kept up a running fire of questions, her father would tell her no more. From a few hints he dropped, she gathered that he was expecting a visitor within a day or so. That rather disappointed her, for with the exception of Louise, she could think of no one she particularly wanted to see at Sunset Beach.

Later that day when a forest ranger stopped at camp for a few minutes, Mr. Parker reported the theft of food and clothing to him.

"So the thief was a young man with a beard?" the ranger pondered. "Don't know of anyone in the area answering such a description. We'll certainly be on the watch for him."

Penny and her father expected to hear no more from the matter. Toward sundown, however, the same ranger returned to camp, bringing the missing

pocketbook. It was stripped of money but still contained a compact and various toilet articles.

"Where did you find the purse?" Penny inquired eagerly.

"On the Beech Trail not far from here."

"Then it was dropped on purpose?"

"Apparently it was. I followed the trail for a quarter of mile, then lost the fellow when he took to the brook."

"Rather a smart fellow to think of that," commented Mr. Parker thoughtfully. "Perhaps he wasn't an ordinary snatch-thief after all."

The ranger offered no comment. As he turned to go, he did assure Penny again that every effort would be made to capture the culprit.

"If the fellow still is in the park we'll get him," he declared. "Don't you worry about that."

With the coming of dusk a penetrating chill settled over the camp. Even the hot supper of steak and potatoes that Penny prepared failed to sufficiently warm the two tenters. They did the dishes and then, not wishing to go to bed, sought the enclosed car for heat.

"It's starting to rain," Mr. Parker observed as a few drops splashed against the windshield. "Looks as if we're in for another siege of it."

"And Louise is due tomorrow," Penny sighed. "Unless the weather improves I'd not blame her one

bit if she turns right around and starts back to Riverview."

The rain came down steadily with a promise of continuing throughout the night. Mr. Parker read a day-old newspaper by the light in the car, grumbling because the news was so old. Presently he switched on the radio, trying without success to tune in the outlaw station which had been heard previously at the same hour.

"No luck," he commented. "Reception must be poor tonight, or the station has changed to another time. Probably it's shifted to a different locality too."

"Dad, isn't it true that the operator of that secret station is an enemy agent?" Penny asked curiously.

"It's a possibility."

"Why not tell me all about it?"

"Nothing to tell yet, Penny. Confidentially I'll admit I came here hoping to help State authorities find the station. So far I've accomplished nothing."

"What clues have you gained?"

"Now Penny, don't quiz me," Mr. Parker laughed. "I'll tell you everything as soon as I'm free to do so."

"In the meantime, maybe I'll find out for myself!" Penny hinted. Abruptly swinging open the car door, she bolted through the rain to the tent.

Breakfast the next morning was a more cheerful meal than had been expected. During the night the rain had ceased and a hot morning sun soon dried out

the drenched canvas. Mr. Parker prepared coffee, eggs and bacon, an unbelievable example of perfect cooking.

"Dad, I didn't think you had it in you!" Penny praised as she sat down on a camp stool beside him. "Maybe you'll develop into a real camper after all."

"Not if I have anything to say about it." Grinning, Mr. Parker dropped two plump fried eggs on his daughter's plate and took the remaining four for himself. "This life could be worse though."

"Dad, what time shall we start for the airport?"

Mr. Parker poured himself a cup of coffee and then answered: "Afraid I won't be able to go with you, Penny."

"But Dad! Louise will be expecting you."

"It's not me she wants to see," Mr. Parker corrected. "I have an important engagement I can't break."

Penny glanced quickly up. She was tempted to ask her father if he intended to see Mrs. Deline. Recalling that she had made her father a promise, she wisely withheld comment. Instead she asked if she might use the car.

"By all means," he consented. "Just go easy on the gasoline."

Breakfast over, dishes were dispatched and the camp put in order. By eleven o'clock Penny and her father were in Sunset Beach.

"Drop me anywhere," Mr. Parker instructed vaguely.

Leaving her father on a street corner, Penny drove slowly toward the airport a mile and a quarter away. There was little travel on the winding highway which curled along the beach. A government jeep whizzed past and two soldiers shouted and waved. Penny waved back.

There was no need to hurry for Louise's plane was not yet due. Penny took her time and enjoyed the ocean scenery. The tide was coming in and gulls free-wheeled over the waves, dipping down at intervals in search of food.

Gazing along the deserted beach, Penny was startled to see a familiar feminine figure hastening toward the lighthouse on Crag Point. The woman wore a white scarf that half obscured her face, yet the girl easily recognized her.

"Mrs. Deline!" she thought, idling the car. "She's certainly going to the lighthouse! I wonder if that gruff old keeper will drive her away as he did me?"

Curious to learn what would happen, the girl drew up at the side of the road. Mrs. Deline was too far away to observe the automobile. Intent only upon her own affairs, she walked swiftly along the beach until she reached the base of the lighthouse.

"Now to see the fun!" chuckled Penny.

The keeper had appeared on the platform and was

gazing down upon the visitor. He called something to the woman that Penny could not hear. But to her amazement, Mrs. Deline started up the iron stairway.

Penny waited expectantly. She was certain that the keeper of the light would order Mrs. Deline away. Instead, he greeted her with a hearty handshake as if they were old friends. They entered the lighthouse tower room together, and the heavy door closed behind them.

CHAPTER

9

A SURPRISE FROM THE SKY

"WELL, IF that isn't strange!" Penny muttered. "I wasn't permitted to set foot inside the lighthouse, but in goes Mrs. Deline without a single question asked!"

Her curiosity aroused, the girl decided to wait and watch. Twenty minutes elapsed. During that time Mrs. Deline did not reappear. Penny grew tired of her vigil.

"Mrs. Deline evidently intends to stay there a long while," she thought as she drove on. "For all I know, she and the lighthouse keeper may be old friends. They did greet each other as if they were acquainted."

At the airport Penny parked on the crowded lot. She dropped into the lunch room for a sandwich and then wandered out on the cement runway. The noon passenger plane presently was announced through the loudspeaker system. A moment later Penny glimpsed the big silver twin-motor transport gliding down over the tree tops. As it taxied up to unload passengers,

she held her breath. Knowing that there had been several last-minute cancellation of tickets, she was afraid that Louise might not be aboard.

But as the door of the big transport swung back, her chum was the second passenger to alight. Fresh and trim in a yellow wool suit, she flung herself into Penny's arms.

"Have a nice trip, Lou?"

"Oh, heavenly! Only it didn't last long enough. We were here almost before I knew we'd started. I nearly lost my ticket to an Army Major too!"

"I was afraid you might not get here," Penny laughed, picking up Louise's light over-night case. "What happened to the Major?"

"Oh, at the last minute he changed his mind, so the company decided I could have my ticket back. And here I am! How's camping?"

"Not much fun so far," Penny confessed truthfully. "But I can feel things starting to pick up."

"We'll have a wonderful time together."

"You just bet we will!" Penny declared with emphasis. "Had anything to eat?"

"Oh, yes, lunch was served on the plane."

"Then we may as well start for camp. I have oodles to tell you, Lou."

Midway to the parking lot, Louise paused, calling attention to a Flying Fortress that was coming in against the wind.

"Let's watch it land," she pleaded. "Did you ever see such a beautiful ship?"

The huge Fortress came in fast for a perfect landing. Crew members began to tumble out through the door. One of the young men in captain's uniform evidently was a passenger for he carried a suitcase.

"Lou!" Penny grasped her chum's arm. "That flier looks like Jerry Livingston!"

"Oh, it couldn't be!"

"All the same, I think it is!"

Penny was so excited that she barely could control her voice. Jerry Livingston was one of her very best friends, a former reporter on the *Riverview Star.* In the days before he had joined the Army Air Force, she and Jerry had shared many an exciting adventure. However, since he had gone away there had been only a few letters and those brief communications had contained no real news.

"It *is* Jerry!" Penny cried an instant later. "Oh, Lou, this must have been the surprise that Dad knew about! How could he keep it from me?"

Breaking away from her chum, Penny darted across the runway. As she called Jerry's name, the young man turned toward her. His handsome, wind-tanned face became a brilliant smile. A dozen long strides carried him to her side.

"Penny!" he cried. He didn't hesitate. He just swept her into his arms and kissed her.

"Sorry, Penny," Jerry apologized, his eyes twinkling. "Guess I shouldn't have done that. But when you've not seen your one and only girl for going on a year—"

"Your which?" Penny stammered, too confused to blush.

"You are my one and only, you know," Jerry grinned. "Always were for that matter. Even in the days when we tracked down news stories together."

Louise came hurrying up. Jerry turned to greet her and the conversation became less personal. But from the way Louise smiled, Penny knew she had seen the kiss and would demand lengthy explanations later on.

"Jerry!" she cried, noticing the decorations on his trim uniform. "They've given you the Distinguished Flying Cross! And the Purple Heart! You didn't write a word about that."

"Nothing to write."

Indignantly, the girls pried the story from Jerry. He had piloted a Flying Fortress in a highly successful raid over the Rumanian oil fields. To reach its target, the Fortress had flown through flaming refineries, so low to the ground that fire actually had leaped up through the bomb bay of the plane.

Swarms of enemy fighter ships had been fought off. Jerry's plane was one of the few to get back to its base safely.

"I was luckier than some of the other fellows," Jerry said modestly. "That was all. Now they've sent me home to rest up for a while."

"Oh, that's marvelous!" Penny said, guiding him toward the waiting car. "You can spend all of your spare time with us!"

Jerry grinned down at her. "I'd like nothing better. But I'm not exactly on furlough."

"I thought you just said—"

"I'm doing a special mission here at Sunset Beach for the Army."

"Anything you dare tell about?"

Jerry helped the girls into the car, stowed the suitcases away, and then slid in beside Penny.

"I can't tell you very much," he replied quietly. "But I can give you a general idea of why I'm here. There's a certain outlaw radio station that has been causing the government considerable annoyance. I've been sent here to try to trace it's location."

"And that's why Dad's here too!" Penny cried. "So you two schemers intended to join forces all along! A pity no one could let me know!"

"I didn't want your father to tell you, because until the last minute I wasn't sure I was coming," Jerry

explained. "The radio station assignment is only part of the reason why I'm here."

"What's the other?" Penny asked as she started the car.

"I'm on the lookout for an escaped German flier. The fellow escaped from a Canadian prison camp and was traced to this locality."

"And you're supposed to be taking a rest from flying!"

"This assignment will be a vacation."

"I'd call it anything but one," Penny said indignantly. Her face suddenly became grave. "Jerry!"

"Yes?"

"What does that escaped prisoner look like?"

"Oh, I can't describe him. I have a photograph in my brief case. Why do you ask?"

"Maybe I've seen him."

"Where?" Jerry could not hide a smile.

"Why at our camp in the woods!" Excitedly Penny told of the bearded stranger who had robbed the Parker stores of food and clothing. Her description of the man was so vague that Jerry could make little of it.

"I'm afraid your thief isn't the man we're after," he said kindly. "After I get to a hotel and open my luggage, I'll show you his picture."

"And will you let me help you trail him?"

"Oh, sure," Jerry answered, only half meaning it. "By the way, drive me to the Crystal Inn. I have a reservation there."

Penny's face fell.

"Anything wrong with the place?" Jerry inquired, observing her change of expression.

Penny shook her head. "The place is all right. It's the people who stay there. Jerry—"

"Yes?"

"Are you susceptible to brunettes?"

"Never noticed it."

"You'll likely meet a Mrs. Deline at the hotel," Penny warned. "Don't have a thing to do with her."

"Why should I?" Jerry was amused.

"She's already made a jelly fish of Dad," Penny went on. "Jerry, stop grinning! This is serious."

"Sorry, I didn't know I was smiling."

"I need your help, Jerry. The truth is, I'm terribly worried about Dad."

"If I know your father, there's no need to worry about him."

"But you don't understand this Mrs. Deline," Penny said desperately. "She's a very clever, scheming woman. Jerry, will you promise to help me try to save Dad from her clutches?"

Jerry managed to keep his face straight. "I'll do my best," he promised.

Penny drew a deep sigh. "Oh, I'm so glad you're here," she murmured gratefully. "With you fighting on my side, the war's as good as won!"

CHAPTER

10

HELP FROM MR. EMORY

WITH JERRY at Sunset Beach, the vacation already promised to take on a rosy hue. Penny was so thrilled to be with her friends again that she paid scant heed to her driving. Several times, enroute to the Crystal Inn, Louise had to warn her to steer more carefully.

"Oh, Jerry, now that you're here the fun will start!" Penny declared happily. "You've no idea how dull things have been without you."

"And that goes double," Jerry said with emphasis. "How's your father?"

"Oh, fine!" Penny laughed. "Camping has made him cross though. By the way, did he know you were coming?"

"Yes, I sent him a wire."

"I thought so! Dad's been keeping it from me. Why all the secrecy, I wonder?"

"Well, my trip here isn't exactly a pleasure jaunt.

And if I have luck, I'll be gone again in a few days."

"I certainly hope you have no luck then," Penny said with a laugh.

The car drew up at the Crystal Inn and Jerry unloaded his suitcase. He was taller, Penny thought, or at least more filled out. The trim uniform set off his broad shoulders. As he bent to pick up his luggage, a group of women on the hotel veranda turned to stare at him.

"I'll check in and clean up a bit," Jerry said. "Then where can I meet you girls?"

"Oh, we'll be somewhere on the beach," Penny replied carelessly. "Do hurry, Jerry. We have a million things to talk over."

The girls parked the car not far from the hotel. As they walked along, scuffing their shoes in the loose sand, they saw Mrs. Deline coming toward them from the direction of Crag Point.

"She's evidently been at the lighthouse all this time!" Penny commented in an undertone. "Now how did she get in there for a visit when I couldn't?"

Mrs. Deline saw that she would meet the girls. Frowning, she glanced quickly toward the boardwalk as if seeking an avenue of escape. However, she could not avoid meeting them without appearing to do so deliberately.

"How do you do," she greeted Penny coldly.

Penny paused to introduce Louise. Mrs. Deline

acknowledged the girl with an indifferent nod. Somewhat confused, Louise nervously twisted a silver ring she wore. It slipped from her finger and fell into the loose sand.

"Oh, how awkward of me!" she exclaimed, and stooped to retrieve it.

The ring buried itself deeper in the sand.

"You'll lose it entirely if you're not careful!" Penny warned. "Here, let me help you."

Getting down on their knees, the girls sifted the sand with their hands. Mrs. Deline seemed amused by their difficulties and did not offer to help.

"Well, I must be getting on to the hotel," she said casually. "I took a long walk this afternoon and I'm tired."

"To the lighthouse?" Penny commented, before she stopped to think.

Mrs. Deline glanced at her sharply. "No, not to the lighthouse," she replied in a tone meant to put the girl in her place. "I shouldn't think of walking that far."

"But I thought I saw you there."

"You saw me?" Mrs. Deline laughed. "Well, my dear, you certainly were mistaken. I walked to the 12th Street bridge. No farther."

Penny started to reply, then thought better of it. There was no point in arguing with Mrs. Deline.

However, she was certain she had seen the widow at the lighthouse. Why the woman should deny it she could not imagine.

After Mrs. Deline had gone, Penny and Louise searched in vain for the missing ring. They knew it could not be many inches away, yet it kept eluding them.

"Oh, I can't afford to lose the ring!" Louise wailed.

"How valuable is it?"

"It's not worth much from a money standpoint. I drew it as a prize in a piece of wedding cake and I've always kept it as a good luck piece."

"We'll find it," Penny said confidently. "That is, if the tide doesn't catch us first."

Just as she spoke, a wave came rippling up the beach. It broke only a few feet away, showering the girls with spray and wetting their shoes.

"If the tide flows over this spot, I never will find the ring," Louise cried in vexation. "Such wretched luck!"

"Having trouble?" inquired a deep masculine voice.

Penny and Louise raised their heads. Unnoticed by them, a stranger had approached. The man wore a wet bathing suit plastered with sand. He had on glasses and a moment elapsed before Penny recognized him as the same fisherman who had warned her about the tide at Crag Point.

"I'm George Emory," he introduced himself. "Have you lost something?"

"My ring," Louise explained.

The man helped the girls search for the missing trinket. By now waves were creeping higher and higher on the beach. A particularly big one sent Penny and Louise scurrying for safety.

"It's no use looking any longer for the ring," Louise gave up. "Perhaps I can find it after the tide turns."

"By then it will be washed away," replied Mr. Emory. "Ah! What's this?"

He stooped to pick a shiny object from the sand.

"It's my ring!" Louise cried in delight. "Oh, thank you for finding it!"

The three retreated to higher ground. As Penny and Louise were about to start for the hotel, Mr. Emory suggested that they might like to share a picnic lunch with him. Neither of the girls was hungry, but to offend the man after he had found Louise's ring was unthinkable. Accordingly, they accompanied him to one of the gaily painted wooden umbrellas along the beach. Beneath its shade Mr. Emory spread a paper tablecloth and produced ample supplies of sandwiches, fruit and lemonade.

"Were you expecting to eat all this food yourself?" Penny asked in amazement.

"No, I was hoping to find a companion who would

share it," replied Mr. Emory. "The truth it, I'm a pretty lonely old fellow."

Penny and Louise stole a quick look at the stranger. By no stretch of the imagination could they call him old. Judging from appearances, he was not yet forty years old.

"My wife died a few years ago," Mr. Emory explained sadly. "Since then I've been like a ship without a rudder. I have plenty of money, but I don't get much enjoyment out of life. I go wherever it suits my fancy, stay until I weary of it, then move on."

"Oh, I see," Penny murmured with a show of sympathy.

She felt ashamed of herself that the story did not move her more deeply. Mr. Emory evidently was a lonely fellow, deserving of companionship. Yet for some reason, he failed to interest her.

"Have you been at Sunset Beach long?" she inquired politely.

"Oh, about a month. I know every nook and cranny along the shore."

"You do?" Penny asked, and her interest revived. "Are there many caves near Sunset Beach?"

"Plenty of them, though none very close. There are several near the lighthouse, back among the rocks. Crystal Cave probably is the most interesting. Then there are half a dozen scattered on up the shore. Interested in caves?"

"Oh, in a general way," Penny replied carelessly.

"Penny is interested in anything that suggests mystery," Louise volunteered with a grin.

"Mystery?"

"Lou's joking," Penny said quickly. She gave her chum a hard look which was not lost upon Mr. Emory.

"Why, Penny!" Louise refused to be silenced. "Only a few minutes ago you were telling me about a radio broadcast said to come from a cave!"

"That was just my idea," Penny said, confused. She jumped hastily to her feet. "We really should be going, Lou."

"Oh, don't hurry away." Mr. Emory offered Louise another sandwich. "Speaking of mysterious radio stations, I've heard of one that is said to be located in a cave somewhere along these shores. Fact is, I've searched for it."

"You have?" Penny asked, sinking back into the sand. "Any luck?"

"None. But I did manage to kill quite a few afternoons. I take it that your father came to Sunset Beach to help the authorities search for the station. Right?"

"Why, whatever made you think that?" Penny asked, instantly on guard. "Do you know my father?"

"I regret I haven't the honor. I chanced to overhear a conversation at the hotel."

"Oh," Penny murmured. She was certain that the information could have leaked out in only one way. Her father had told Mrs. Deline, who in turn had spread the news about the hotel.

"I trust I'm not inquiring into secrets," Mr. Emory went on cheerfully. "Fact of the matter is, I might be able to help your father."

"I'm sure Dad will want to talk with you."

"I'll look forward to meeting your father. Think you can arrange it?"

"Why, I suppose so," Penny said, though with no great enthusiasm. Again she experienced a queer, uneasy feeling. She did not entirely trust Mr. Emory.

The man smiled and seemed to relax. As the girls arose to leave he tried once more to detain them.

"See that old fellow down the beach?" he inquired, pointing to an aged man who was picking up objects from the sand with a sharp-pointed stick.

"Yes, what about him?" Penny asked, turning to stare. "Just an ordinary beachcomber, isn't he?"

"I'd not call Old Jake Skagway ordinary," Mr. Emory corrected. "If you're really interested in solving the radio station mystery, I'd advise you to keep watch of that rascal."

"But why him?" Penny asked.

"I can't explain," Mr. Emory said with finality. "It's just a tip. Take it or leave it."

Yawning, he stretched himself full length on the sand and turned his back to the girls.

CHAPTER

11

A MAN OF MYSTERY

THE FOLLOWING day when Penny told her father of Mr. Emory's desire to meet him, Mr. Parker showed little interest.

"I've no time to waste getting acquainted with strangers," he said. "Why is the man so eager to know me?"

"He thinks he may be able to help you locate that hidden radio station."

Mr. Parker's annoyance visibly increased. "Penny," he said severely, "you've evidently been talking out of turn."

"I didn't mean to let him know why you're at Sunset Beach, Dad. It sort of slipped out."

Louise, who was washing the breakfast dishes, spoke quickly.

"It was my fault," she insisted. "Penny tried to stop me, but I gave the information before I thought."

"Well, it doesn't matter," Mr. Parker assured her

kindly. "I came here mostly for a vacation. If I should be lucky enough to dig up a few facts about the radio station, well and good. If not, no harm will have been done."

"You sent for Jerry to help you?" Penny inquired curiously.

Mr. Parker shook his head. "No, I knew he was coming, but I didn't send for him. If I had, I'm afraid the Army wouldn't have been obliging enough to have filled my order."

Penny helped Louise put away the camp dishes and pick up loose papers. It was only eight-thirty but already most of the work had been done. With Louise to help, camping no longer was a burden. Even Mr. Parker seemed to have moments of enjoying the outdoor life.

"Anyone riding to Sunset Beach with me?" he inquired cheerfully. "I have a date with Jerry this morning."

Penny and Louise both wanted to go. They washed at the brook, changed into becoming "town" dresses, and soon were ready.

At the Crystal Inn, Jerry was not to be found. A clerk explained that the young man had left the hotel a half hour earlier but was expected to return soon.

"He probably went somewhere for breakfast or a walk," Mr. Parker remarked, sinking into a comfortable chair. "I'll wait for him."

Penny and Louise loitered in the lobby. Presently Mrs. Deline came from the dining room and Mr. Parker politely arose to greet her. The widow took a chair beside him and they began to chat in an animated way.

"Let's get away from here!" Penny muttered to Louise. "I don't like the scenery."

The girls went outside into the warm sunshine. Because the Parker automobile was at the curb they climbed into it and sat watching the sea.

"Why do you dislike Mrs. Deline so intensely?" Louise presently asked her chum.

"Because she's aiming to be my stepmother, that's why!"

"Oh, Penny!" Louise laughed outright. "I'm sure you have a mistaken idea about the entire situation. Your father isn't serious in liking her."

"Then he's certainly developed remarkable talents for acting," Penny retorted with a sniff. "I wish we'd never come to Sunset Beach."

"You'd be willing to forego the mystery?"

"Who cares about a radio station?" Penny asked crossly. "Dad won't tell me anything about the case, and probably Jerry won't either. It seems to be one of those affairs for the experts only."

"If I know you, Penny, you'll manage to get in on the affair," Louise said, her eyes twinkling.

Penny turned on the ignition and started the car.

"I'm just not interested," she announced flatly. "Mrs. Deline has taken all the fun out of me. Want to go for a ride?"

"Where?"

"Oh, just up the beach."

"Isn't it dangerous to drive on the sand?"

"Everyone does it at low tide. The sand is hard and firm along this stretch of beach."

Louise offered no further objection, so Penny drove slowly away from the hotel. The car rode on silken tires, making only a soft swishing sound as it rolled smoothly over the sand.

"Oh, this is fun!" Louise cried in delight.

"We might drive to the lighthouse," Penny proposed, steering to avoid two bathers who crossed in front of the car.

Following the curve of the beach, the girls kept on until the sand became so soft that they were afraid to drive farther. The lighthouse was close by. Penny, curious to learn what sort of reception the keeper would accord her on the second visit, proposed to Louise that they call there.

"If he let Mrs. Deline visit the tower why can't we?" she argued. "Come along, let's try to get in!"

Abandoning the car on the beach, they waded through the dunes, climbed a fence, and ultimately reached the base of the tower. No one seemed to be in evidence. Penny started boldly up the iron steps.

However, before she had gone very far, the keeper, Jim McCoy, came out on the platform.

"Didn't I tell you no visitors are allowed here?" he called down angrily.

"I saw a lady come here yesterday!" Penny returned.

"You must have dreamed it," retorted the lighthouse keeper. "No visitors allowed. Don't make me tell you again!"

Penny retreated, decidedly crushed.

"You asked for it, kitten," Louise teased as they walked toward the car. "I don't blame the keeper for not wanting visitors."

"Mrs. Deline was there," Penny insisted stubbornly. "Why should he deny it?"

Half way to the car, the girls paused to pick up a few large shells lying in the deep sand. The task became an absorbing one. Before they realized it, the sun was high overhead and their faces were being burned by the direct rays.

"Let's go," Louise urged. "The tide turned a long while ago. We should be returning to the hotel."

"Okay," Penny agreed. She stooped to pick up another shell. As she straightened, she observed an old man in ragged clothing coming down the beach.

"Lou," she said in a low tone, "there's that same man Mr. Emory was telling us about!"

"The beachcomber?" Louise turned to stare.

"Yes, and he's coming this way. Perhaps it might be worth while to watch him."

"He's not seen us yet."

Penny glanced about for a hiding place. The only one that offered was a huge sand dune. Pulling Louise along with her, she crouched down out of sight.

In a moment the old beachcomber came along. He was whistling and seemed to have not a care in the world. His face, viewed at close range, was weather-beaten, his hair uncombed, and his clothing had not been washed in many a day.

"What's so mysterious about him?" Louise whispered. "Why did Mr. Emory say he'd bear watching?"

"Maybe he's not really a beachcomber," Penny returned, low. "He may be an Enemy Agent in disguise."

"You have Enemy Agents on the brain!" Louise chuckled. "Likewise, man-snatching widows."

The beachcomber passed within a few feet of the girls. He crossed the courtyard of the lighthouse and was seen to take a trail which led amid the rocks.

"Lou, perhaps he's going to one of the caves!" Penny cried. "You know Mr. Emory said this locality is honeycombed with them."

"Let him go," Louise answered indifferently. "It's lunch time and I'm hungry."

"Your appetite will have to wait. I'm going to follow that man!"

"Oh, Penny."

"But this may be important."

"And it may be just another of your so-called bright ideas," Louise retorted. "Well, lead on, and let's get it over with."

The beachcomber already had disappeared amid the mass of piled-up rock farther back from shore. Penny had marked the locality well with her eye. She was able to lead Louise to the place where he had vanished.

"See, there's a well-worn trail," she indicated triumphantly. "He must have taken it."

They followed the path, and a moment later caught a fleeting glimpse of the beachcomber. At times the trail was so narrow that the girls barely could squeeze between the rocks. Wind whistled around the cliffs, whipping hair and blowing skirts.

Unexpectedly, Penny, who was in the lead, came to the low entranceway of a cave.

"He must have gone in there!" she declared excitedly. "Listen!"

From deep within the cave the girls could hear a strange sound.

"Rushing water!" Louise said in awe. "The Cave must have a waterfall or an underground river."

"We'll soon know." Penny started into the cave only to have Louise clutch at her hand.

"Don't be silly, Penny. We have no flashlight."

"But we can't let that beachcomber get away. We want to learn what he does."

"I can bear up without knowing."

"Well, I can't," Penny announced with equal firmness.

"But it may be dangerous. Let's go back to the hotel and get Jerry or your father."

Penny hesitated, then shook her head. "You stay here if you like, Lou," she replied. "I'm going inside."

Before her chum could detain her, she stooped low and crawled into the narrow, dark tunnel.

CHAPTER

12

CAUGHT BY THE TIDE

UNWILLING TO be left behind, Louise followed her chum into the dark cavern. Once she and Penny were well beyond the yawning mouth of the cave, they could not see a foot ahead of them. Guided by the sound of rushing water, they groped their way along a damp wall.

"This is awful!" Louise whispered nervously. "Let's turn back."

Penny might have yielded to her chum's coaxing but at that moment the tunnel broadened out and became lighter. Directly ahead a series of steps led down to a lower room of the cave.

"This place must be safe enough or steps wouldn't have been built here," she whispered. "Don't be nervous, Lou. We may discover something important."

Louise muttered that they were more likely to break their necks. However, she cautiously fol-

lowed Penny down the rock-hewn steps. Half way down, they both paused. From below came a weird sound.

"What was that?" Louise whispered.

"It sounded for all the world like the note of a pipe organ!" Penny observed. "There it is again—a different tone this time."

Noiselessly the girls moved on down the steps. Ahead of them they now could see a moving light which undoubtedly was a flash lantern carried by the beachcomber. Drawing closer, they saw the man himself. In the great cavern his shadow appeared grotesque and huge.

"What is he doing?" Louise whispered in awe.

The man was unaware that he had been followed. He stood in the center of the great chamber, gazing with wrapt expression at the stalagmites which rose in strange formations from the cave floor. The girls could hear him muttering to himself. At the risk of being seen they moved closer.

"Music! Music!" the old man mumbled. "Talk about your pipe organs! They ain't in it with *this!*"

He held a long stick in his hand and with it began to explore the row of stalagmites, striking them one by one, at first with a slow tempo and then faster and faster. The weird sounds echoed and reached through the galleries of the cavern.

"Pretty!" the old man prattled. "It's the music o' Heaven. There ain't no music to equal it."

Again the beachcomber struck the stalagmites, listening raptly while the sounds died slowly away.

"Come on, Penny," Louise urged, tugging at her hand. "Let's get out of here. That old goof has lost his buttons."

Decidedly crestfallen, Penny permitted herself to be pulled along the passage and up the steps. As the girls groped their way to the cave's mouth, they still could hear the weird echoing tones.

"That was a good joke on you!" Louise teased. "You thought you were going to find a hidden radio station!"

"Well, we did find a cave," Penny said defensively.

"We didn't exactly discover it," Louise amended. "This must be Crystal Cave. Seemingly that old beachcomber regards it as his own personal property."

"Mr. Emory certainly gave us a wrong steer. A mysterious character, my eye!"

"You'll admit that the old fellow is interesting," Louise laughed. "However, I doubt he'll warrant much attention from the FBI."

"All right, laugh," Penny retorted grimly. "You think my detective efforts are a joke anyway."

"No, I don't, Penny. But I will say I doubt you'll

have success tracing a hidden radio station. After all, it's a problem that has the State authorities baffled. Not to mention Uncle Sam's Army."

The girls stepped from the cave out into the brilliant sunshine. Gazing toward the sea, they were amazed to see how high the tide had risen. Giant waves were washing very close to the Parker automobile left on the beach.

"Ye fishes!" Penny exclaimed in horror. "I forgot all about the car!"

"And the tide's coming in fast!"

"The Point will be cut off in a few more minutes!" Penny added, recalling Mr. Emory's warning. "We'll have to travel, and travel fast!"

Scrambling down from the rocks, the girls plunged through the dunes to the beach. A wind was blowing and the sea had an angry look.

"If just one wave strikes the car, the wheels will sink in the sand, and then we'll be in it!" Penny cried.

With increasing alarm she noted that sand was damp within a foot of the rear wheels. And as she jerked open the car door, a greedy wave nipped again at the rubber.

"We'll soon be out of here," Louise said encouragingly.

Penny stepped on the starter and to her relief the motor caught instantly. In great haste she turned the car around, circling away from the inrushing sea.

"Careful!" Louise warned. "The sand is dreadfully soft this far up shore."

Too late Penny realized the same thing. She could feel the car starting to bog down. The motor began to labor. Then the car stalled completely.

"We're stuck!" she gasped.

Both girls sprang out to look at the wheels. Their spirits sank. On one side, front and rear tires were bogged deep in sand.

"Start the engine again!" Louise urged desperately. "I'll try to push."

Penny obeyed, but her chum's puny strength made not the slightest impression upon the car. It could not be moved a foot. The spinning wheels only drove deeper and deeper into the sand.

"What shall we do?" Louise asked helplessly. She turned to stare at the incoming sea. Each wave was breaking a little closer to the car.

"This place will be under in another twenty minutes," Penny calculated. "Even if the car isn't washed away, the salt water will ruin it. How did we ever get into such a mess?"

"Just by being careless. If only we weren't so far from the hotel!"

"I'll run to the lighthouse," Penny decided desperately. "Maybe the keeper will help us."

Both girls were badly frightened, not for their own safety, but because they feared that the car would be

damaged beyond repair. Once the waves began to strike it, it would sink deeper and deeper into the sand. Salt water would corrode all of the bright chromium.

"We've no time to waste!" Penny cried, darting away.

The girls plunged through the sand drifts to the lighthouse. Evidently the keeper already had observed their plight, for he was standing on the upper platform peering down into the courtyard.

"Our car is stuck in the sand!" Penny shouted. "Can you help us get it out?"

"No, I can't," the keeper answered gruffly. "You should have watched the tide."

"There's no one else to help us," Penny pleaded. "Just a little push—"

"I'm forbidden to leave my post."

"Then will you telephone to the Inn? Or to a garage?"

"I could 'phone but it wouldn't do any good," the keeper said reluctantly. "Your car will be under water before a tow-car could get here."

Exasperated by the man's unwillingness to help, Louise and Penny ran back to the car. Already waves were lapping against the rear wheels. The situation seemed hopeless.

"Shall I try to push again?" Louise asked.

"It wouldn't do any good. We're not strong

enough." In desperation, Penny's gaze wandered down the deserted store. Suddenly she saw a lone fisherman who was wading through the surf. She recognized him as George Emory.

"He'll help us!" she cried confidently.

The girls shouted Mr. Emory's name. Apparently he heard, for he turned his head quickly. Their plight, they thought, must be instantly evident, but Mr. Emory did not seem to comprehend. He waved his hand as if in friendly greeting, and then, reeling in his fish line, turned and walked away from them.

CHAPTER

13

A HIDDEN PACKAGE

"WHY, MR. EMORY doesn't understand!" Penny cried, aghast. "Can't he see that we're stuck here with the tide rolling in?"

The girls shouted again and again. If the man heard, he gave no sign.

"I don't believe he wanted to help us!" Penny declared furiously. "Probably he's afraid he'll overstrain himself pushing!"

Unwilling to give up without a last try, she sprang into the car and once more started the engine. It roared and labored but could not pull the vehicle. Sick with despair, Penny allowed the motor to idle. She slumped behind the steering wheel, only to straighten suddenly as she thought she heard her name called.

Louise too heard the cry for she turned quickly toward the main road some yards back from the

beach. A young man in uniform was running across the dunes toward the girls.

"It's Jerry!" Penny cried jubilantly. "He'll help us!"

"He will if he can," Louise corrected. "The tide's coming in so fast now. I doubt anyone can get us out of here now."

Jerry did not waste time asking questions. Taking in the situation at a glance, he instructed Penny to remain at the wheel. With the motor racing, he and Louise pushed with all their strength. At first the rear wheels kept spinning in the sand. A great wave slapped the rear end of the car, spraying Louise from head to foot.

"It's no use!" she gasped. "We can't do it."

"Yes, we can!" Jerry insisted. "Try once more, Louise."

Again they pushed and this time the car actually moved a few feet before it bogged down. Encouraged, Jerry and Louise tried harder than before. The wheels suddenly struck firm sand, dug in, and the car began to creep forward. Penny kept it moving until she was sure the footing beneath the tires was solid. Then she pulled up so that Jerry and Louise might leap aboard.

"Drive as fast as you can for the hotel!" Jerry instructed crisply. "We'll be lucky to make it."

Where an hour before the roadway along the

beach had been wide and ample, there now was only a fringe of white sand. To avoid the incoming waves, Penny had to drive dangerously close to the dunes. And midway to the hotel, they came to a flooded stretch of beach.

"We'll have to risk it," Jerry advised as Penny hesitated to drive on.

The water was not deep but the sand was wet and treacherous. Choosing a moment between breakers, Penny braved it, and to her intense relief the car rolled through without sinking down.

"It's clear sailing now," Jerry said as a wider strip of beach opened before them. "We're well beyond the Point."

Mr. Emory was walking along the shore and as the car went past, he waved his hand in a friendly way. Penny did not bother to return the salute, pretending she did not see him.

"I'm sure he knew we were in trouble and didn't want to help," she told Jerry. "The more I see of that man the less I like him."

"Who is he anyhow?"

"Just a vacationer. He got Lou and me all excited yesterday with his talk about that hidden radio station."

"How do you mean?" Jerry asked with interest.

Penny repeated the conversation, and mentioned how Mr. Emory had suggested that the old beach-

comber was a mysterious character that would bear watching.

"Not old Jake Skagway?" Jerry asked, amused.

"I believe that was his name."

"Jake's the only beachcomber I know hereabouts. He makes his living picking up things on the beach and selling them. Folks say he buries some of his loot in the caves."

"How do you know so much about him, Jerry?"

"Oh, I used to run down to Sunset Beach real often years ago. I know this locality like a book. Guess that's why the Army sent me here to do a little scouting around."

Penny waited expectantly, but Jerry offered no more information as to the reason for his visit to Sunset Beach.

"Probably Lou and I were taken in by Jake Skagway," she admitted after a moment. "If we hadn't followed him into the cave, we certainly wouldn't have involved ourselves in such difficulties."

Upon reaching the Crystal Inn a few minutes later, the girls searched for Mr. Parker. He was nowhere to be found. After waiting for a time, they left the car with Jerry and hiked to the forest camp. There the early afternoon was devoted to camp tasks. When Mr. Parker still did not come, Penny proposed that they return to Sunset Beach for a plunge in the surf.

"Too cold," Louise shivered.

"Well, let's go down to Sunset Beach anyhow," Penny urged. "I get restless just sitting here in camp."

"You know you want to see Jerry again," Louise teased. " 'Fess up."

"All right, I do want to see him," Penny admitted unabashed. "Jerry's my very best friend. I've not been with him in months and I suppose in a few days he'll be shot off to goodness-knows-where."

"He's not told you very much about why he came here."

"No," Penny said briefly. The subject was a sore one with her. She felt that both her father and Jerry were keeping secrets.

The tide was still high when the girls reached the beach, but the flow was outward. Sprawling in the warm sand, they watched the gulls.

"Wonder what became of Jerry and Dad?" Penny speculated. "They're probably together somewhere."

"Or with Mrs. Deline," Louise suggested wickedly.

She was sorry that she had spoken for Penny's face immediately became as black as a thundercloud.

"Sorry," Louise apologized. "I was only joking."

Penny continued to scowl for at that moment she glimpsed Mrs. Deline walking rapidly down the beach. The widow came from the direction of the lighthouse and was alone. To avoid the incoming

waves she waded ankle deep through the great sand ridges along the drift fence.

"That's queer," Penny muttered, sitting up.

"What is?"

"Why, Mrs. Deline apparently has been at the lighthouse again. What's she doing now?"

The widow had paused. Carefully she gazed up and down the deserted shore, but she did not see Penny and Louise who were hidden from view by a sand dune. However, by raising up slightly, they could see her plainly.

Mrs. Deline carried a package of considerable size under her arm. Seemingly satisfied that no one was at hand to observe her actions, she moved swiftly to one of the sand dunes near the drift fence. As the girls watched in amazement, she dug a deep hole and buried the package. Her work completed, she carefully brushed sand over the spot and obliterated her own footprints one by one.

"What was the idea of that?" Louise asked in bewilderment.

"That's what I want to know!" Penny muttered. "We'll wait until she leaves and then find out the contents of that package!"

But Mrs. Deline did not immediately go away. Instead she sat down in the sand close by. The girls could not see very well but they thought she was writing something on the skirt of her white suit.

"Why is she doing that?" Louise asked in bewilderment.

"I'll bet a cookie she's writing down the location of what she hid in the sand dune!" Penny speculated. "That's so she can find it again!"

"But why write it on her skirt? And why should she hide anything here on the beach?"

"Because she's a spy!" Penny declared triumphantly. "I've been suspicious of her from the first!"

"Yes, you have, darling," agreed Louise. "But would a spy necessarily hide a package? If Mrs. Deline had information to communicate wouldn't she send it to her superiors? Besides, Sunset Beach isn't even an important manufacturing town."

"That's true. But I've heard Dad say that the Coast Guards watch this place closely. Because of its isolation and jagged coastline it's considered a likely spot for surprise night landings by the Enemy."

"Only this morning you thought old Jake Skagway was a rascal," Louise chuckled. "You don't catch me falling for your theories this time."

"Then you have no interest in that hidden package?"

"Of course I have! I merely don't agree that Mrs. Deline is a spy."

"Quiet!" Penny warned. "Here she comes!"

Mrs. Deline had arisen from the sand and came rapidly down the beach. She did not see the girls until

she was very close to them. Involuntarily, she paused, and looked somewhat disconcerted. Recovering, she spoke coldly.

"Hello," Penny responded, her gaze on the woman's white flannel skirt. It bore not a single telltale mark.

Mrs. Deline went on down the beach.

"You see," Louise whispered when the woman was beyond hearing, "she didn't write anything on her dress."

"But we saw her do it!"

"We only thought we did."

"Maybe she wrote it in invisible ink."

"Oh, Penny, you certainly have an imagination," Louise sighed.

"I suppose I imagined about the package too?"

"No, she really did bury something in the sand."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Penny demanded, leaping to her feet. "Let's dig it up, and then maybe we'll have the answer to a few of our questions."

CHAPTER

14

VOICE FROM THE CAVE

FROM a distance Penny and Louise had marked well the spot where Mrs. Deline had buried the package. But as they approached the drift fence all of the dunes seemed strikingly similar in appearance. They could not agree as to the exact mound which contained the hidden package.

"It was buried in this one, I think," Penny said, starting to dig. "Mrs. Deline certainly did a good job of covering her tracks."

"You're wasting time working on that dune," Louise insisted. "I'll get busy over here and turn up the package in nothing flat."

Selecting a mound of sand several feet from Penny, she began to dig with a will. The mysterious package proved elusive. Scarcely had the girls started work than a few raindrops splattered down.

"Oh, it's going to storm!" Louise exclaimed, turning startled eyes toward the dark sea.

The rain came down faster and faster. Faced with a choice of abandoning the search or being drenched, the girls decided to make a dash for the hotel.

As they darted up the steps at the Crystal Inn, they were surprised to see Mrs. Deline sitting on the veranda. A spyglass lay in her lap. Whether she had been watching the sea or their own antics they had no way of knowing.

"Have you seen my father, Mrs. Deline?" Penny asked, shaking the raindrops from her flying hair.

"Indeed, I don't keep track of his whereabouts," Mrs. Deline replied coldly. "By the way, did you find what you were searching for in the sand?"

The question caught Penny off guard. She stammered a few words which only caused the widow to smile in a knowing, amused way.

"I don't mind telling you what I buried in the sand," she resumed. "It may save you a little trouble. The package contained nothing but fish bones."

"Fish bones!"

"Yes, I had just visited my friend, Jim McCoy, at the lighthouse. It's most difficult to bury anything there because of so many rocks. He asked me to dispose of the scraps for him."

"Oh," Penny murmured, completely deflated.

"I've been watching you girls through the spyglass," Mrs. Deline went on. "It really was amusing."

"I can imagine," Penny agreed grimly. "Oh, well,

I'm glad to provide a little amusement for this dead place."

She and Louise retreated until they were screened from the widow by a potted palm.

"I guess she scored on you that time, Penny," Louise commented. "So we wasted our strength digging for garbage!"

"You needn't rub it in."

"But it's all so silly. Why don't we try to like Mrs. Deline, Penny?"

"I'll leave that job up to you. Furthermore, how do I know she was telling the truth? Maybe she just handed us that story so we wouldn't go on digging in the dunes!"

"That's so!" Louise acknowledged. "Mrs. Deline isn't the type to be doing gracious little jobs for anyone."

"If Jim McCoy asked her to bury a package of garbage, she would have disposed of it long before she did," Penny reasoned. "Instead, she walked quite a distance down shore. Then she seemed to select a particular dune, as if by pre-arrangement."

"You think she may have hidden something there expecting another person to pick it up?"

"That's my theory, Lou. Oh, I wish this rain would let up."

Restlessly Penny walked to a window. The rain

showed signs of slackening. And as she watched, a taxi drew up in front of the hotel. Jerry Livingston leaped out.

"Wait for me!" he instructed the driver. "I'll be right back."

Penny and Louise managed to block Jerry's path as he came hurrying into the hotel.

"Hello, girls," he greeted them offhanded. "Want to go for a drive into the country?"

"We certainly do," Penny accepted for both. "What's our destination?"

"Tell you on the way," Jerry answered.

He disappeared into an elevator, but was back in the lobby within a few minutes. Taking Penny and Louise each by an elbow, he escorted them to the waiting cab.

"In a way, this is a secret trip," he said after he had given directions to the driver. "Ever see a radio monitoring truck?"

"Never even heard of one," Penny replied. "What is it?"

"Well, we have a truck equipped so that our instruments pick up the direction from which any short wave broadcast is sent. It's not generally known that the Army's at work here, so whatever you girls see you must keep under your sunbonnets."

The taxi sped along the country road, following

a route that was unfamiliar to the girls. By the time it drew up several miles from Sunset Beach the rain had ceased.

"Tumble out," Jerry said, opening the cab door. "This is the end of the line."

He went ahead, breaking a hole in the tall hedge at one side of the road. Eagerly the girls followed him through the gap. In a clearing just beyond a clump of saplings stood what appeared to be an ordinary covered Army truck.

An enlisted man came toward Jerry and the girls, saluting smartly.

"Are you picking up any signals?" Jerry asked him.

"Nothing yet, sir. The weather hasn't been very favorable."

"You've had your equipment set up here two days now?"

"Right, sir."

"It's not likely we'll get anything today or tonight," Jerry replied. "Oh, well, we'll have to have patience. Sooner or later the station will go on the air again, and then we'll learn its location."

Louise and Penny were curious to learn more about the monitoring truck. Jerry took them inside, introduced them to the officers, and showed them the radio apparatus.

"Our truck is equipped with rotating antennae,"

he explained. "Whenever the unknown station starts to broadcast we'll be able to swing our loops toward the signals. Then we chart the signals and where the lines intercept, the station is located."

"As you explain it, Jerry, finding any radio station is a simple matter."

"It is, providing the station doesn't move in the meantime. Unfortunately, Mr. Voice from the Cave is an elusive fellow."

"You have no idea who the man may be?"

"No, he's known to FBI agents only as B4 which is a code number."

"What is the purpose behind the broadcasts?" Louise inquired. "Enemy propaganda?"

"We know that the station is enemy owned and operated," Jerry replied. "So far that's about all we do know, for we've been unable to break the code. We suspect that persons connected with the station may be aiding German prisoners to escape from the country."

"Prisoners originally held in Canada?" Penny inquired.

"Yes, they've been aided by a ring of very clever spies."

Penny was silent as she thought over the information. There were many questions she longed to ask.

"Jerry—" she began, but just then there came an interruption.

In the Army truck an officer had adjusted his earphones. His attitude as he listened was one of tense expectancy.

"Picking up any signals?" Jerry demanded.

The other man nodded. "Something's coming in! Yes, it's our friend, the Voice. In just a minute we should know exactly where the station is located."

Jerry and the girls remained in the truck, eagerly awaiting a report from the efficient men who manned the radio direction finders.

"Okay, we've got it charted!" came the terse announcement a moment later.

"Where's the station located?" Jerry demanded eagerly. "Let's see the chart."

It was thrust into his hand. Jerry stared at the intercepting lines and then at a map of the district.

"Why, the station seems to be located along the shore!" he exclaimed. "Apparently in one of the caves—Crystal Cave I'd judge."

"That's the cave where Louise and I were!" Penny exclaimed. "But we saw no shortwave radio apparatus. Only crazy old Skagway who was playing a tune on the stalagmites."

"All the same, direction finders don't lie. The broadcast came from Crystal Cave! But that doesn't mean the station will be there fifteen minutes from now."

"What's to be done?" Penny asked. "Can't the

Voice be caught before he has a chance to move his portable outfit?"

"A message already has been sent to Headquarters. Army men should be on their way to the cave now."

"Jerry, we're not far from Crystal Cave ourselves!" Penny exclaimed, her eyes dancing with excitement. "Can't we go there too?"

"We can and will!" Jerry laughed. "But if we expect to catch our friend, the Voice, there's no time to lose. Come along, girls, if you're traveling with me."

CHAPTER

15

AFTERGLOW

PENNY SPRAWLED on the grass beside the dying embers of the camp fire. Listlessly, and with very bad aim, she hurled acorns at a brown squirrel chattering overhead.

"You've been in a bad mood ever since we got back from Crystal Cave," Louise observed, coming out of the tent. "But why take it out on that poor creature?"

Penny raised herself on an elbow. She scowled and did not reply.

Louise moved over to the fire, seating herself on a log beside her chum.

"Oh, brace up," she said, slipping an arm about Penny's shoulders. "In all my life I've never seen you act so discouraged."

"I feel lower than the worms. Nothing's gone right since we came to Sunset Beach."

"On the contrary, I can't see that anything has gone so very wrong."

"Wasn't our trip to the Crystal Cave a bust?" Penny demanded.

"Well, it wasn't a success."

Louise smiled wryly at the recollection. With Jerry and the Army men, she and Penny had spent the afternoon searching various caves along the water front. Not a trace had been found of the mysterious radio station which so plagued local authorities. The search had been a long and exhausting one. In the end, though the others kept on, she and Penny had been compelled to give up.

"My feet hurt yet from scrambling over the rocks," Penny declared. "I suppose Jerry and those Army officers will keep searching half the night."

"And I'll warrant they never do find the station," Louise contributed. "This is one mystery I wish you had never stumbled into, Penny."

"I'm beginning to feel the same way, Lou. This is supposed to be a vacation. I'd like to see Dad and Jerry once in awhile."

"So that's what's bothering you!"

"Well, you know Jerry will be here only a few days at most," Penny said defensively. "I've barely had a chance to say 'hello' to him. Dad's always down at the hotel too."

"What you crave seems to be male companionship."

Penny tossed a stick of wood on the fire, making

the sparks fly. "I could do with a little," she admitted. "Life is too dull here."

"Dull?" Louise gazed at her chum suspiciously. "It's no use being surrounded by mystery if one can't get into the thick of it. So far all the adventure has by-passed us."

"We might stir up a little excitement by looking for that package Mrs. Deline buried in the sand."

"Not today," Penny said with a sigh. "Too tired. Besides, I told Jerry about it and he wasn't much impressed."

"So that's the reason for your gloom," Louise remarked wisely. "As a detective you don't rate."

"Something like that. Jerry met Mrs. Deline at the hotel today and he thought her a very charming lady."

"Oh!" Louise laughed. "No wonder you're all smashed to bits!"

Penny got up from the grass and began preparations for supper. She peeled a pan of potatoes and opened a can of corn.

"We need a bucket of water from the spring," she said suggestively. "Want to help me carry it?"

"I will," Louise agreed without enthusiasm.

The trail led up a steep path to a rocky ledge from which cool spring water gushed out of a steel pipe. Penny drank deeply and then hung her tin bucket over the outlet to fill.

"It's starting to get dark," she observed, noticing how shadowy the woods had grown. "I hope Dad returns to camp soon."

"Someone's coming now," Louise remarked as her keen ears detected the sound of footsteps on the trail below.

"Probably one of the rangers."

Penny unhooked the water bucket from the pipe, and the girls started down the trail, carrying it between them. Emerging from among the trees, they glimpsed a figure below them. A woman in a dark cloak who carried a picnic hamper, was walking rapidly up the winding trail.

Penny stopped so suddenly that she spilled water on her sandals.

"Lou, that's Mrs. Deline!" she whispered.

"What of it, pet? She's evidently going on a picnic."

"At this time of day? And alone?"

"Well, that part of it does seem a bit odd."

Penny pulled her chum into the bushes beside the path. Crouching low beside their water bucket, they allowed the woman to pass. Looking neither to the right nor left, she hastened on up the trail.

"She seems to be in a big hurry," Penny commented, coming out of hiding. "Now where do you suppose she's going?"

"Probably to the cabin. One of your ranger

friends told me about a rustic place farther up the trail. It was built especially for the enjoyment of the public."

"But why would Mrs. Deline go there alone?"

"Maybe she intends to meet someone."

"Lou, that's probably what she is going to do!" Penny exclaimed. "Let's follow her and find out."

"What about supper?"

"Who cares for food?" Penny demanded. "If Dad comes home he can rustle a little for himself. It's more important that we follow Mrs. Deline."

"Okay," Louise agreed, "only I'm in no mood to walk very far. Remember, we've had one wild chase today."

Leaving the water bucket behind the bushes, the girls set out in pursuit of Mrs. Deline. Not without admiration they acknowledged that the widow was a better trail climber than they. Though the hamper she carried evidently was heavy, she fairly skimmed up the rough trail. Penny and Louise fell farther and farther behind.

"She's heading for the cabin all right," Penny puffed. "Of course she intends to meet someone. Otherwise, she'd have had her picnic on the beach or some place closer to the hotel."

A clearing opened up through a gap in the trees. Mrs. Deline paused as she came within view of the

rustic log cabin and gazed carefully about. The girls saw her look at her wrist watch.

"She has an appointment with someone," Penny declared.

Mrs. Deline walked to the door of the cabin and tested it to make certain that it was unlocked. She did not go inside. Instead, she set down the hamper and gazed slowly about the clearing. Louise and Penny, at the fringe of woods, saw her start as she looked directly toward them.

"She's seen us!" Louise gasped.

"We'll have to go out and meet her," Penny decided instantly. "Let's pretend we just happened to be coming this way. But we'll stick around and see who she's meeting."

Mrs. Deline stiffened visibly as the girls sauntered out of the woods toward her.

"Well, this is a surprise meeting you," she said in a tone none too friendly. "Is your camp located near here?"

"Down the trail a short distance," Penny replied, thoroughly enjoying the widow's discomfiture. "Having a picnic?"

"Why, yes. I love the outdoors and thought I'd take a hike this afternoon."

"It's rather late for a picnic," Penny said pointedly.

"It took me longer to get here than I expected."

In an effort to discourage her young annoyers, Mrs. Deline pushed open the door of the cabin. Before she could pick up the hamper, Penny seized it.

"Let me," she said quickly. "My how heavy! All this food for one person?"

"Certainly," Mrs. Deline answered. "Who else?"

Penny set the hamper on the table. Deliberately she raised the lid. The basket was filled with food, enough for a dozen persons, and in the bottom she saw a folded wool blanket. Beneath the blanket were several bulky garments which she took to be men's clothing. Before she could see plainly, Mrs. Deline jerked the lid of the hamper into place.

"Please!" she said with emphasis.

"I was only trying to be helpful," Penny said, pretending to look injured. "Don't you want Lou and me to dust off the table and spread out the picnic things?"

"I do not. If you'll excuse me for saying so, I came on this picnic to be alone. I enjoy solitude."

"But it's getting dark," Penny argued. "We wouldn't think of deserting you. The cabin has no light."

"I don't mind the dark. Anyway, I brought candles. I really prefer to be alone."

Thus dismissed, Louise started to leave. Penny lingered, trying to think of some excuse. Just then,

from somewhere in the woods, she heard a shrill whistle unlike any bird call.

"What was that?" she asked alertly.

"I heard nothing," said Mrs. Deline.

Nevertheless, a moment later the woman sauntered to an open cabin window. Deliberately she turned her back to the girls, trying to block their view. Quickly she raised and lowered her handkerchief.

The movement was deftly executed, but swift though it was, Penny saw and understood. Mrs. Deline had signaled to an unseen person beyond the fringe of trees!

CHAPTER

16

SUSPICION

PENNY MOVED swiftly to the open cabin door, gazing toward the darkening woods. No one was visible amid the shadows. Yet she was certain that Mrs. Deline had signaled to someone lurking among the trees.

The widow had turned from the window to unfasten the lid of the picnic hamper.

"Since you girls are here you may as well stay and share my supper," she said without warmth. "There's enough food for all."

Louise's chin tilted proudly. The invitation was grudgingly given and she meant to decline. Penny forestalled her by saying:

"How nice of you, Mrs. Deline! Of course we'll be delighted to remain."

Mrs. Deline made no reply, though obviously she had not expected an acceptance. Irritably she laid out the picnic dishes—sandwiches, a salad, cake,

cookies, and fruit—all carefully prepared and cooked at the hotel kitchen.

"You certainly did bring plenty of food for one person," Penny commented, helping herself to a chicken sandwich. "Isn't that clothing in the bottom of the basket?"

"Only a blanket." Mrs. Deline closed the lid firmly. "I thought I might need it if I should sit on the damp ground."

Hungry as bears, Penny and Louise, did not try to curb their healthy, young appetites. Mrs. Deline, on the other hand, scarcely nibbled at the food. Several times she arose and paced nervously to the window.

"It's growing dark and I should return to the hotel," she said the instant the girls had finished eating. "I'll not bother to repack the lunch basket."

"Oh, we'll help you pick up everything," Penny offered.

"Please don't bother. I'll merely pay the hotel for the basket."

Penny was convinced that Mrs. Deline deliberately intended to leave the hamper behind. Despite the deep inroads she and Louise had made, considerable food remained. It occurred to her that the widow hoped to leave what remained so that the person hiding in the woods might come to the cabin for it after the party had gone.

"I can't be bothered with a heavy basket," Mrs. Deline said impatiently. "We'll just leave it on the table."

"Oh, the rangers wouldn't like to have us leave food here," Penny protested. "It will only take a minute to clean up everything."

Disregarding Mrs. Deline's order, she began to repack the remains of the lunch.

"But I don't wish to carry the basket all the way to the hotel!"

"Louise and I will help you."

Tossing her head, Mrs. Deline walked out of the cabin, allowing the door to slam behind her. Louise and Penny finished packing the lunch and hastened down the trail in pursuit.

"Maybe we shouldn't cross her so," Louise whispered uneasily. "I think she intended to meet someone here!"

"I'm sure of it," agreed Penny. "We spiked her little plan. I have an idea who she intended to meet too!"

"Who?"

Penny could not answer, for by this time she and Louise were practically at Mrs. Deline's heels. The widow was walking as fast as she could.

"You'll have to keep the basket," she told the girls irritably. "I'm sure I'll never carry it back to the hotel."

All the way to the Parker camp Mrs. Deline ignored Penny and Louise. And as they bade her goodbye, she barely responded.

"Can't we drive you down to the hotel in the car?" Penny offered, feeling slightly ashamed of her actions.

"Thank you, no," the widow answered icily. "You've done quite enough for one day." She vanished down the darkening road.

After Mrs. Deline was beyond view, the girls retraced their way to the spring for the water bucket. As they approached, they thought for a moment that they heard retreating footsteps. The realization that they were alone in the woods, made them a bit nervous. Hurriedly they recovered the bucket and carried it to camp.

"Now tell me what you think, Penny!" Louise commanded when they were inside the tent.

"Why, it's clear as crystal." Penny struck a match to the wick of the gasoline lantern and hung it on a hook of the tent pole. "Mrs. Deline went to the cabin intending to meet someone. She carried extra food, a blanket, and if I'm not mistaken, clothing for a man."

"You thought she signaled from the window?"

"I'm sure she did, Lou. She warned the person, whoever he was, not to approach. She hoped by leaving the basket behind to get it into his hands after we'd gone."

"You thwarted her in that."

"We did together," Penny chuckled. Her face suddenly became sober. "Lou—"

"Yes?"

"It just occurred to me! Maybe the man she intended to meet was the same fellow who stole food from our camp."

"That's possible. But why should Mrs. Deline be interested in a common tramp?"

"How do we know that fellow was a tramp?" Penny speculated. "Jerry told us about a young soldier that had escaped from a Canadian prison camp. Mrs. Deline may be trying to help him by supplying food and heavy clothing!"

"As usual, Penny, aren't you leaping to hasty conclusions?"

"Maybe I am, but everything fits in beautifully. I've thought from the first that Mrs. Deline was nothing less than a spy or an international crook."

"You've aired that theory before," Louise said, stretching out on the cot. "Wonder when your father will get here?"

"I wish he would come," Penny replied, glancing anxiously toward the road. "At least I have one consolation."

"What's that?"

"I know he's not with Mrs. Deline. Oh, Lou,

think how horrible it would be to have a spy for a stepmother!"

"It would be something different anyhow," Louise chuckled. "Want to listen to the radio awhile?"

"Okay," Penny agreed, "maybe we can tune in that outlaw station. It's about time for the regular nightly broadcast."

Closing themselves into the car, the girls tried without success to get the outlaw shortwave station. Tuning instead to a dance orchestra, they discussed the day's happenings and made elaborate plans for the morrow.

"I'm really going to work," Penny announced grimly. "No Mrs. Deline ever will outwit me! Our first job must be to find that package she buried in the sand."

"And what of the person hiding in the woods?"

"The rangers ought to take over that part." Penny peered out through the car window at the dark woods which hemmed in the camp. "Somehow," she admitted, "I don't like the idea of being here at night. I'm not exactly afraid, but—"

"Listen!" Louise ordered sharply. "Someone's coming!"

Penny snapped off the radio. Tensely, the girls watched the road. The next instant they relaxed, for it was Mr. Parker who trudged wearily up the

slope. Seeing Penny and Louise in the car, he came over to apologize for being so late.

"I've been with Jerry for the past two hours," he explained. "Time went faster than I realized."

"Any news?" Penny asked eagerly.

"Not about the radio station if that's what you mean. The fellow got away with his portable outfit slick as a whistle."

"The authorities have no idea who the man is, Dad?"

"Not the slightest. So far they've not been able to break the code he uses either. But in time they'll get him."

Having gleaned what information they could from Mr. Parker, the girls related their own adventure. As they fully expected, he made light of the episode at the cabin.

"Why should Mrs. Deline expect to meet anyone there?" he argued. "Penny, I'm afraid you don't understand her and misinterpret her actions."

"I don't understand her, that's certain."

"As to a man loitering about the camp," Mr. Parker resumed, "I've been worried about that ever since food was stolen. As I must be gone so much of the time, why wouldn't it be better for us to move to the hotel?"

Penny stiffened for an argument, and then suddenly changed her mind.

"All right, Dad," she astonished him by saying, "as far as I'm concerned, we can move tomorrow. I've had enough of the lonesome life."

"Why, that's fine!" Mr. Parker said heartily. "Splendid!"

After he had moved on, to sit for awhile by the dying embers of the fire, Louise remarked to Penny that explanations were in order.

"How come you're ready to desert the rough and rugged life?" she demanded. "At first you were dead set against moving into the hotel."

Penny carefully raised the car window so that her father would not overhear.

"I believe in fighting the Enemy on his own territory," she explained elaborately. "Mrs. Deline will bear watching. I intend to devote all my waking hours to the cause."

"So Jerry has nothing to do with it?"

"Jerry?"

"You wouldn't want to move to the hotel so you'd see more of him?"

"What an idea!" Penny scoffed. "Whoever thought of such a thing!"

"You did or I'm no mind reader."

"Well, it may have crossed my mind," Penny acknowledged with a giggle. "In fact, I can see quite a few advantages to hotel life. With luck we'll yet make something of this vacation!"

CHAPTER

17

VISITORS NOT PERMITTED

PENNY STOOD before the mirror in the hotel room and struggled to coax a little curl into her damp hair. She and Louise had spent two hours splashing in the surf that morning. The salt water had tightened their skins and produced discouraging results with their tresses.

"This place does have it over a forest camp," Penny said, gazing about the comfortably furnished room she shared with Louise. Her father's room was three doors down the hall. "A shower bath, no meals to cook, no dishes to wash, and the sea at one's elbow."

"I like it better," replied Louise. She had curled up kitten fashion on the bed and was making deep inroads into a box of chocolates. "So far though, we've not done much fancy sleuthing."

"We've only been here a few hours. Where do you suppose Mrs. Deline keeps herself?"

"In her room no doubt. Why do you worry about her so much, Penny?"

Penny twisted a few ringlets over her finger and abandoned the project as hopeless. "Lou, you know all the prize answers without asking me," she said. "I've told you a dozen times why I distrust that woman."

"Doesn't it all simmer down to one thing? You're jealous as a green-eyed cat!"

"Maybe I do dislike her," Penny grinned. "On second thought, I'm sure of it! But facts are facts and have nothing to do with my personal feelings. In the first place, didn't she get Dad to bring her with us to Sunset Beach?"

"But what does that prove? She has no car of her own and the trains are so crowded."

"I think she knew that Dad was coming here to try to dig up a story about the outlaw radio station," Penny went on, unruffled. "She's probably pumped him of information."

"Your father knows how to look after himself."

"That's what *he* thinks!" Penny muttered. "I wouldn't place any wagers on it myself. Why, he's been as blind as a bat."

"I'm afraid you see enough for two or three people," Louise chuckled.

"I told you, didn't I, how that vampire tried to steal our car while we were on our way here?"

"Two or three times, darling."

"Well, it would bear repeating. I think she intended to meet someone that night—perhaps the same person who was hiding in the woods!"

Louise, methodically eating chocolates, mulled over the possibility.

"Jerry told us that an escaped flier from a Canadian prison camp may be hiding somewhere near here," Penny resumed, wandering to the window. "Perhaps Mrs. Deline is trying to help him!"

"You have a new theory every minute," Louise yawned. "Why not think up one and stick to it?"

Penny did not answer for at that moment she observed Jerry Livingston leaving the veranda of the hotel.

"Come on, Lou!" she cried, jerking her chum off the bed. "I want to see Jerry before he escapes!"

"Talk about Mrs. Deline pursuing your defenseless father!" Louise protested as she was pulled down the hall to the elevator. "Her tactics at least are more subtle than yours!"

"This is different," Penny retorted shamelessly. "Jerry and I are old friends."

Swinging through the revolving doors of the hotel, the girls raced after Jerry. Breathless from running, they finally overtook him far down the boardwalk.

"Why, hello," he greeted them with a broad smile. "I hear you've moved into the hotel."

"Lock, stock and barrel," Penny laughed. "We want to be in the thick of things. Any news about the radio station?"

"Nothing I can report. I'm on my way now to Intercept Headquarters."

"Did you see Dad this morning?"

"Only for a few minutes. He's doing a little special work for me."

"At least I'm glad it's for you and not Mrs. Deline," Penny said stiffly. "Jerry, there are some things you should know about that woman."

"Suppose you unburden your heart," Jerry invited, seating himself on a sand dune. "I have about ten minutes to listen."

"Don't encourage her," sighed Louise. "She's slightly cracked on the subject, you know."

"Nevertheless, Penny has ideas at times," Jerry paid her tribute. "Shoot!"

Talking like a whirlwind, Penny delved deeply into the subject of Mrs. Deline. She repeated how the widow had buried a package in the sand, but it was not until the episode of the cabin was described that Jerry really seemed interested.

"Penny, at first I didn't take your Mrs. Deline talk very seriously," he admitted. "Perhaps you have something after all!"

"I'm sure of it, Jerry!"

"Have you reported to the park rangers?"

"Dad may have seen them, I'm not sure. We left camp in a big rush."

"Then I'll take care of that, Penny. We'll have the park searched again and try to find that fellow!"

"Then you do believe he's the escaped flier!" Penny exclaimed.

"Probably not," was Jerry's discouraging reply. "Nevertheless, we can't afford to overlook any possibility."

"What about the package in the sand?"

"You remember where it was buried?"

"Approximately."

"I'll not have time to go with you now," Jerry said, looking at his wrist watch.

"Louise and I haven't much to do this morning. We'll be glad to search."

"Go ahead," Jerry urged. "If you fail then I can take over. The important thing is not to tip off your hand. Don't let anyone suspect what you're about."

Penny and Louise nodded soberly. They felt rather important to have been assigned a definite task.

"Report to me as soon as you find that package," Jerry urged as he started on. "It may contain something of vital importance. It may not. We'll withhold judgment until we have the facts."

Left to themselves, the girls lost not a moment in hastening to the section of beach where Mrs. Deline had been seen to bury the package.

"Now just where was it?" Penny asked, gazing about the deserted dunes. "What became of our marker?"

"We left a stick to show the exact spot."

"Not a sign of it now. What wretched luck!"

Though the girls knew the general locality where the package had been buried, all of the dunes looked discouragingly alike. Not a footprint remained to guide them.

"I'll bet a cent Mrs. Deline came back here and removed that stick!" Penny declared. "Maybe she dug up the package too!"

"Anyone could have taken the stick. Why do you think she did it?"

"Because she watched us digging for the package. Well, let's look for it anyhow."

With none too much enthusiasm, the girls set to work. The tide was much lower than upon their last visit and the shoreline did not look the same. Nor could they agree within forty feet of the right place to dig.

"You try one dune, and I'll work on another," Penny offered as a compromise.

An hour of unavailing work found the pair too discouraged to keep on digging.

"If this is the right place, Mrs. Deline or someone has removed the package," Penny declared, sinking back on her heels.

"We may as well give up," Louise added wearily.

Penny slid down the dune and emptied sand from her shoes.

"There should be an easy way to beat Mrs. Deline at her own little game," she remarked thoughtfully. "For instance, why does she always wear that jade green charm?"

"Because she likes it I'd imagine."

"But wouldn't you think she'd take it off at night?"

"Perhaps she does, Penny."

"Not the night I was with her. I distinctly gained the impression that there was something about it she was afraid I'd see."

"A message contained inside?"

"That's been my theory from the first, Lou. Now if only we could lay our hands on the charm—"

"Finding the package would be a lot easier. We can't waylay the woman and take the jade elephant by force. Or can we?"

"No," Penny agreed reluctantly, "I don't think Dad would like that. And there's always the possibility I might be wrong."

"The probability, you mean," corrected Louise.

Penny retied her shoes and glanced toward the hotel. Far up the beach she saw Mrs. Deline, and the widow was walking slowly toward the sand dunes.

"Duck!" Penny ordered, rolling over one of the high ridges. "We don't want her to see us here. She'll suspect what we've been up to."

Louise crouched behind the dune with her chum, though she complained that she felt silly doing it. Apparently, Mrs. Deline had not seen the girls. She came steadily on.

Drawing close, she peered directly at the dune where the girls had taken refuge. For a second they feared that she had seen them. But she passed on without another glance.

"It looks to me as though she's on her way to the lighthouse again," Penny remarked after Mrs. Deline was far down the beach. "Wonder why she goes there so often?"

"I thought visitors weren't allowed."

"According to the rules they're not."

From behind the dune, the girls kept watch of the widow. Presently they saw her climb the steps of the lighthouse and disappear into the interior.

"Well, that settles it!" Penny exclaimed indignantly.

"Settles what?" Louise straightened up, brushing sand from her skirt.

"If Mrs. Deline can get into that lighthouse, so can I. We'll make an issue of it!"

"Not today," said Louise dubiously.

"Right now!" Penny corrected, starting down the beach. "That lighthouse is government property, and as citizens we have certain rights. Let's assert them and see what happens!"

CHAPTER

18

INSIDE THE LIGHTHOUSE

UNCHALLENGED, PENNY and Louise reached the base of the lighthouse. But as they slowly climbed the iron stairs, their courage fast slipped away.

"What will we say to the keeper?" Louise faltered. "I've even forgotten his name."

"I haven't," said Penny. "It's Jim McCoy. If Mrs. Deline is allowed inside the tower, shouldn't we have the same privileges?"

"She's a personal friend."

"That should make no difference," Penny argued. "This is government property."

"Let's not do it," Louise pleaded, holding back.

Having proceeded so far, Penny was in no mood to retreat. Quickly, lest she too lose her courage, she rapped hard on the tower door.

Minutes elapsed. Then the heavy oak door swung

back and Jim McCoy, the burly keeper, peered out at the girls. His bushy brows drew together in an angry scowl.

"You here again!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Penny, making the word crisp and firm.

"I'll have to report you if you keep pestering me," the keeper scolded. "How many times have I told you no visitors are allowed?"

"But you don't treat everyone the same!" Penny remonstrated. "Mrs. Deline just came here."

"Mrs. Deline? Who's she?"

"Why, a woman who stays at the hotel. She came through this door not five minutes ago!"

"You must have imagined it. I've had no visitors."

Penny's silence said more plainly than words that she did not believe the keeper.

"So you think I'm lying, eh?" he demanded unpleasantly. "Okay, come in and see for yourselves. I'm breaking a rule to invite you into the tower, but maybe then you'll be satisfied and quite bothering me. We have work to do here, you know."

The keeper stepped aside so that the girls might enter.

"My living quarters," he said curtly. "You see, I have no visitors."

Decidedly ill at ease, the girls gazed about the little circular room. The walls were lined with built-in cupboards. Nearly all of the furniture had been

made with a view to conserving space. As Mr. McCoy had said, there were no visitors—no evidence that Mrs. Deline ever had been there.

"Are you satisfied?" the keeper demanded unpleasantly.

"But we were sure Mrs. Deline came here," Penny stammered.

"There's been no one today except early this morning when a government inspector paid me a visit."

Penny did not believe the man but she deemed it wise to appear to do so.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I guess we have made nuisances of ourselves."

"That's all right," the keeper said in a less unfriendly tone. "Kids are kids. Now that you're here, look around a bit."

"Oh, thank you," Louise replied gratefully. "I've always wanted to see the inside of a lighthouse."

"I have some work to do," Mr. McCoy announced. "The light's not been operating right and I'm trying to get the mechanism adjusted. I'll be back."

He went out, allowing the door to slam hard.

The girls surveyed their surroundings with keen interest. On a table near the window there was a shortwave radio. A circular couch occupied another curving corner of the room.

"What became of Mrs. Deline?" Penny whispered. "She certainly came here."

"Of course she did! We saw her plain as day!"

"She must be somewhere in the tower. Probably there's a room above this one."

Penny tiptoed to the door and tried to open it. To her surprise and chagrin, it would not budge.

"My Great Aunt!" she whispered. "We're locked in!"

"Maybe the door's just stuck." Louise strode across the room to help Penny. Both of them tried without success to open it.

"Let's shout and pound!" Louise suggested.

"No, wait! I think we've been locked in here on purpose."

"Oh, Penny!"

"Now don't get nervous. The keeper's no fool. He'll have to let us out."

"But why would he lock us in?"

"Because he's provoked at us for one reason, Lou. Another, something's going on here that he doesn't want us to know about. He and Mrs. Deline may be having a tête-à-tête in the room above."

"Then let's listen. Maybe we can overhear their conversation."

Penny nodded and fell silent. Though the girls listened for a long while, no sound reached their ears.

"This is a nice situation!" Louise fumed. "I think the door locked itself. We ought to shout for help."

"Goose, a door doesn't lock itself."

"This one might have a trick catch."

"It was Mr. Jim McCoy who accomplished the trick," Penny said. "Listen! Someone's coming now."

Plainly the girls could hear footsteps on the iron balcony outside the door. A moment later they were able to distinguish a murmur of men's voices. The footsteps moved on and a moment later they heard a door close overhead.

"Another visitor!" Penny announced. "Did you hear what was said, Lou?"

"Couldn't make out a word."

"Nor could I. But that voice sounded familiar. I'm sure I've heard it somewhee."

"I had the same feeling, Penny."

The girls listened intently, hoping to overhear conversation on the floor above. However, the walls of the lighthouse were so thick that not a word reached them. Now and then they thought they heard Mrs. Deline's high pitched voice.

"Louise, it's just come to me!" Penny whispered a moment later. "I believe Mr. McCoy's visitor may be George Emory!"

"The voice did sound a little like his. But why would he come here?"

"Maybe we've under-rated George Emory. Why, all this time he may have been trying to get information from us."

"He did ask us quite a few questions, particularly about your father."

"And he seemed to know a lot about that outlaw radio station, Lou. Maybe he tried to throw us off the track by suggesting that we watch old Jake Skagway."

"We certainly fell for it, Penny."

"We did, if you assume that George Emory is upstairs having a conference with Mrs. Deline and the lighthouse keeper. But we're not sure."

"No, we're not, Penny. One easily can be mistaken in voices."

Determined to hear more, Penny cautiously climbed up on the radio table, so that her head and ear were close to the ceiling.

"Can you make out anything?" Louise whispered.

Penny shook her head in disgust. After a few minutes she dropped lightly down from the table.

"Walls are too thick," she announced. "I could hear three voices though. Two were men and the other, a woman."

"Then Mrs. Deline must be here. The keeper lied about that part."

Presently the girls heard footsteps again on the iron stairway. They moved to the window, hoping to see whomever was descending from the room above. However, the little round aperture was so situated that it gave a view of only one side of the Point.

They could not see the stairway nor the stretch of beach leading to the hotel.

"We're certainly learning a lot!" Louise said crossly. "I've had enough of this. Let's shout for help."

"All right," Penny agreed. "We may as well find out whether or not we're prisoners."

Crossing to the heavy oak door, she pounded hard on the panels. Almost at once the girls heard someone coming.

"Don't let on what we suspect," Penny warned her companion.

The next moment the door swung open to admit the keeper of the light.

CHAPTER

19

A LOCKED DOOR

"I WAS gone a little longer than I meant to be," Jim McCoy apologized as he came into the room. "Did I keep you waiting?"

"We probably wouldn't have waited if you hadn't locked the door!" Louise said sharply.

The keeper's eyebrows lifted and he looked slightly amused. "Locked in?" he echoed.

"Yes, we couldn't get the door open."

"Oh, it sticks sometimes. Been intending to fix it for several days. If you had pushed hard it would have opened."

"We certainly pushed hard enough," Penny said dryly. She was more than ever certain that the lighthouse keeper had unlocked the door only a moment before entering. Clearly, he had meant to prevent Louise and her from seeing and hearing what went on in the room above.

"Come along," the keeper invited. "I'll show you the tower."

"No thank you," Penny replied coldly. "We've spent so much time here that we'll have to be getting back to the hotel."

"As you like." The keeper shrugged, and looked relieved by the decision.

Jim McCoy stepped away from the door, and the girls hastened down the iron stairway. No one was in sight on the beach. Whoever had visited the lighthouse during the time they were imprisoned, had disappeared.

When they were well down the beach, Louise and Penny slackened their pace. Glancing back they saw that the keeper of the light still stood on the tiny iron balcony watching them.

"That man gives me the creeps," Louise remarked. "Did you believe what he said about the door sticking?"

"I did not," Penny returned with emphasis. "I think he locked us in on purpose, probably because he was expecting visitors and didn't want us to see too much."

"As it turned out we didn't learn a thing."

"We have no proof of anything," Penny admitted slowly. "Nevertheless, we're pretty sure Mrs. Deline visited the tower."

"George Emory too."

"That part is pure guess," Penny said, "so we don't dare consider it too seriously. Did you ever see Mrs. Deline with George Emory?"

"Why, no. But then, we've not been at the hotel long."

"Let's find Jerry or Dad," Penny said abruptly. "We ought to report to them."

Returning to the hotel, the girls looked in vain for Mr. Parker. The publisher was not in his room nor anywhere in the lobby. Jerry apparently had not returned from Intercept Headquarters.

"There's Mrs. Deline," Louise whispered, jerking her head toward a high-backed chair not far from the elevator.

The widow was reading a newspaper. If she saw the girls she paid no attention to them.

"Let's talk to her and see what we can learn," Louise suggested.

Penny had another thought. "No," she vetoed the suggestion. "Mrs. Deline would be more likely to learn things from us. That woman is clever."

Just then Mrs. Deline arose, picked up her purse, and went out the front door of the hotel. On their way to the elevator, Penny and Louise noticed that the woman carelessly had left a handkerchief and her room key lying on the chair.

"I'll turn them in at the desk," Louise said, picking up the articles.

"Wait, Lou!"

Louise glanced at her chum in surprise.

"I have an idea!" Penny revealed, lowering her voice. "Are you game to try something risky?"

"Well, I don't know."

"This chance is tailor-made for us!" Penny went on. "Mrs. Deline simply handed her room key over to us. Let's use our opportunity."

"Enter her room?" Louise asked, shocked.

"Why not? FBI agents think nothing of examining the belongings of a suspected person."

"But we're not FBI agents, Penny. I don't want to do it without asking Jerry."

"By that time it will be too late. It's now or never."

"Mrs. Deline might catch us in the act."

"That's a chance we'll have to take." Penny, in possession of the room key, walked to the front door of the hotel. She was reassured to see that Mrs. Deline had seated herself on a bench some distance from the veranda.

"The coast's clear," Penny reported, coming back to Louise. "What do you say?"

"Well, I suppose so," Louise consented nervously.

An elevator shot the girls up to the fourth floor.

To locate Mrs. Deline's room required but a moment, and the halls fortunately were deserted. Penny fitted the key into the lock and pushed open the door.

"We'll have to work fast," she said, closing it behind them again.

The room was in perfect order. Only a few toilet articles had been set out on the dresser. Mrs. Deline's suitcase was only half unpacked.

"It looks to me as if the widow is holding herself ready to fly at a moment's notice," Penny commented. "Otherwise, why didn't she unpack everything?"

"What do you expect to find here?" Louise asked nervously. "Let's get it over with fast, Penny."

"Start with the bureau drawers," Penny instructed. "Search for any papers, letters or the sort. I'll go through the suitcase."

Carefully the girls began examining Mrs. Deline's personal belongings. Almost at once Louise reported that the bureau contained nothing of interest. Penny, however, had more luck. She came upon a pearl-handled revolver buried beneath a pile of silk underclothing.

"Jeepers!" she whispered, touching the weapon gingerly. "Now will you believe me when I say that the widow isn't the sweet little girl she'd have us believe!"

Louise's eyes had opened wide at sight of the revolver.

"And here's that white suit she wore!" Penny cried, lifting out a folded garment from the suitcase. "Look, Lou!"

From the skirt of the suit had been cut a neat, square hole.

"Well, of all things!" Louise exclaimed. "What's the meaning of that?"

"Mrs. Deline wrote something on the skirt—don't you remember? Probably she used a pen with invisible ink."

"But why on her skirt, Penny?"

"She'd just been to the lighthouse. Perhaps she learned something there and she wanted to write it down before she forgot. Possibly she didn't have any paper. Then when she got back here, she either destroyed the message, or sent it to someone."

"Well, I don't know," Louise said doubtfully. "It's all so fantastic. I wouldn't believe a bit of it except for this revolver. Having it doesn't look so good."

"And don't forget the green elephant charm," Penny reminded her. "I wish we could find it here."

"Not a chance. Mrs. Deline always wears it around her neck. She had it on today. I noticed."

Time fast was elapsing and the girls were worried lest someone discover them in the room. Hastily they

replaced everything as they had found it, and relocking the door, stepped out into the hall.

"What's our next move?" Louise asked as they buzzed for a down-going elevator.

"To tell Jerry and Dad, of course. But before that, there's one thing I wish we could do, Lou. It would give everything we have to report a more substantial basis."

"What's that, Penny?"

"Why don't we get our hands on the jade green elephant? I've a hunch that it contains something important—perhaps evidence that would crack the case wide open."

"And just how do you propose that we acquire the charm?" Louise asked sarcastically. "Are we to waylay Mrs. Deline and take it by force?"

"Afraid that wouldn't do."

"There's no other way to get it. Mrs. Deline wears that charm as if it were her skin. I've never seen her without it."

The elevator was coming down so Penny spoke hurriedly.

"There is a way," she said softly, "if only it will work. Think we could get Mrs. Deline to go bathing in the surf with us?"

"And ruin that lovely hair-do? Don't be silly."

"All the same, it's worth trying," Penny urged.

"Let's go to our room now and get our bathing suits."

"I don't see any point in it."

"You will," Penny laughed, entering the elevator. "If my little plan works we'll have keen sport and maybe do our country a good turn!"

CHAPTER

20

NYMPHS OF THE SEA

"HOW YOU expect to get Mrs. Deline to go swimming with us is beyond me!" Louise opined as she and Penny left the hotel, their bathing suits swinging over their arms. "It's none too warm today. She dislikes us both intensely. Furthermore, she never swims."

"Any other reasons?" Penny asked cheerfully.

"That should be enough."

"Just wait and watch," Penny chuckled. "I just hope she doesn't suspect we've been prowling in her room. If she got wise to that she'd report us to the hotel management."

Before leaving the hotel the girls had taken care to drop the room key in the chair where Mrs. Deline had left it. They were confident that no one had seen them take the key or enter the room.

The widow remained as the girls last had seen her.

She was sitting on a bench facing the sea, her gaze fixed on the deep blue line of the horizon. As the girls passed beside her, she looked up, frowning slightly.

"We're on our way to the bath house," said Penny, her tone implying that the matter was one of great importance.

"Really?" Mrs. Deline's voice barely was polite.

"Wouldn't you like to come with us?" Louise invited cordially.

The invitation took Mrs. Deline by surprise. "No, thank you," she declined. "I can't swim."

"We'll teach you," offered Penny.

"You're too kind. I don't care for the water. I particularly detest cold water."

"The air is warming up," Penny tried to encourage her. "Why not try it with us?"

"Nothing could induce me."

Louise nodded grimly, as much as to say that she had known how it would be. Penny would not give up. She decided to adopt drastic measures.

"No, I didn't suppose you would go into the water," she said. "You're probably afraid you'll get salt water on that lovely skin of yours, or muss up your hair."

"Oh!" gasped Mrs. Deline. "The very idea!"

"Isn't that the reason?" Penny pursued ruthlessly. "You have to protect your beauty?"

"No, it's not the reason!" Mrs. Deline snapped. "If I had a bathing suit, I'd show you!"

"You can use mine," Penny said promptly. "Louise has an extra one she'll let me have."

Mrs. Deline looked trapped and angry. She sprang to her feet.

"All right, I'll go swimming!" she announced. "If I catch pneumonia I suppose you'll be satisfied!"

"Oh, you'll love the water once you're in," Penny said sweetly. "The bath house is this way."

Mrs. Deline spent so long getting into the borrowed suit that the girls began to fear she had outwitted them. But just as they were ready to give up, the woman came out of the dressing room. Penny's suit was a size too small for her so that she looked as if she had been poured into it. Her legs were skinny, her hips bulged. She still wore the elephant charm.

"Don't I wish Dad could see her now!" Penny muttered. "What a disillusionment!"

Ignoring the girls, Mrs. Deline walked stiffly toward the surf. A wave rolled in, wetting her to the knees. Mrs. Deline shrieked and backed away.

"It's freezing!" she complained.

"You have to get wet all at once," Penny instructed kindly. "This way."

She seized Mrs. Deline's hand and pulled her toward the deeper water.

"Let me go!" Mrs. Deline protested, trying to shake free. "Stop it!"

Penny held fast to her hand. A big roller broke over their heads. Mrs. Deline sputtered and choked and struggled.

"Oh, this is dreadful!" she whimpered.

"You have to watch for the waves and jump just as they strike you," Penny laughed. "Now!"

She leaped, but the widow mistimed the roller. It struck her a resounding whack on her shoulders and head.

"Oh! Oh!" she moaned.

"Here comes another!" warned Louise. "A big one too!"

Mrs. Deline broke away from Penny. She started to run for shore. The big roller overtook her, sweeping her from her feet.

This was the opportunity that Penny awaited. Pretending that she too had lost her balance, she allowed the tide to carry her straight into Mrs. Deline. For an instant they both were beneath the surface of the water.

Penny worked fast. Clutching Mrs. Deline as if in terror, she yanked hard at the slender chain that held the green elephant charm. It snapped and the jade piece came off into her hands. Deftly she thrust the charm into the front of her bathing suit. Then she popped up above the water, winking at Louise.

Mrs. Deline scrambled to her feet, clutching at the broken chain.

"See what you've done!" she accused Penny. "You pulled it apart. My beautiful charm has fallen into the water!"

"Let me help you look for it," Louise offered, darting forward.

As the pair were groping about on the sandy floor, another wave rolled in. Penny neglected to warn Mrs. Deline. It struck her from behind, toppling her over on her face. Her cap slipped awry and she swallowed salt water.

"Oh, I can't stand any more of this!" she spluttered. "It was cruel of you to get me to come into the surf! Now I've lost my charm, and it was all your fault, Penny Parker."

"I'll buy you another ornament," the girl offered. Seeing Mrs. Deline's distress she felt a bit ashamed of herself.

"Another ornament!" the widow mocked. "I don't want another! I want the one I've lost. It's of vital importance to me to keep it."

Mrs. Deline made another futile search for the charm.

"It's been washed away," she cried. "I'll never find it now!"

Glaring furiously at Penny, she turned and fled to the bath house.

"Did she really lose the charm?" Louise demanded the moment the girls were alone. "Or did you get it, Penny?"

Penny answered by producing the green elephant charm from the front of her bathing suit where she had hidden it.

"Easy as taking candy from a babe," she chuckled. "My, but was she hopping mad!"

"You may not be laughing if your father hears about this," Louise warned. "He's apt to look at matters from a different angle than we do."

Penny skipped through the shallow water and sat down on the beach well beyond the reach of the waves. Louise flopped beside her. Eagerly they examined the jade green trinket.

"Looks like any ordinary charm to me," Louise remarked. "No special carving."

"It should open," Penny said. "The first night when Mrs. Deline and I shared a room, I was sure I saw her close it."

Louise turned the charm over and pried at it with a hairpin.

"It does have a back lid!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Penny, I think it's going to open!"

"I'll say magic words while you work," Penny laughed. "Furthermore, I'll keep watch of the bath house. We don't want Mrs. Deline to pop out here and see us."

Louise pried again at the lid of the charm. It gave suddenly.

Inside the tiny cavity was a folded piece of paper. While Louise stared in delighted awe, Penny gained possession. With nervous haste she unfolded the paper. She gazed at it a moment and her face fell.

"Why, I can't make anything of the writing!" she declared in disappointment. "The words don't make sense."

"Just a mess of letters," Louise agreed, peering over her shoulder.

The girls were decidedly let-down for they had gone to much trouble and risk to obtain the jade ornament. But Penny's disappointment did not last long. As she stared at the paper, its significance dawned upon her.

"Why, this is important, Lou!" she cried. "Maybe we've stumbled into something big!"

"How do you mean?"

"Don't you see?" Penny demanded triumphantly. "The letters of this message must comprise a secret code! If only we can break it down we may learn all we need to know about Mrs. Deline and her strange friends!"

CHAPTER

21

THE CARDBOARD BOX

WHILE PENNY and Louise were puzzling over the strange writing found inside the jade charm, Mrs. Deline appeared in the doorway of the bath house. Barely in time to escape detection, the girls hid the tiny elephant and the paper in the sand.

Mrs. Deline crossed the beach to speak to the girls. Her hair was damp and stringy, her face pinched and blue from cold.

"Here's your suit!" she snapped, slapping the wet garment into the sand at Penny's feet. "I hope you enjoyed the swim! I'm sure I didn't."

Turning her back, the widow marched to the hotel.

The moment Mrs. Deline had disappeared into the white brick building, Penny dug the jade elephant and paper from the sand.

"Let's get dressed," she urged Louise. "We've no time to waste."

So thrilled were the girls over what they had accomplished that they could talk of nothing else. Penny felt that by obtaining the jade elephant she had proven her case.

"You thought I was only jealous of Mrs. Deline," she told Louise triumphantly as they dressed in adjoining booths. "Now what do you say?"

"That you're a genius!" Louise praised. "Mrs. Deline certainly is mixed up in some shady business."

Once dressed, the girls wrapped the jade elephant in a handkerchief and carried it to the hotel. Jerry was nowhere to be found, and a bellboy told Penny that her father had gone for a walk.

"Perhaps we can work the message out ourselves," Penny suggested hopefully. "Let's try."

In their hotel room, the girls spent an hour attempting to decipher the strange jargon of letters appearing on the paper. At the end of that time, Penny tossed aside her pencil in disgust.

"This is a job for an expert," she declared. "I certainly don't classify as one."

The telephone jingled. Penny answered it and was delighted to hear Jerry's familiar voice. He was down in the lobby and had been told that the girls wished to see him.

"We certainly do!" Penny answered gaily. "Hold everything! We'll be with you in a jiffy."

The elevator being entirely too slow, the girls raced down the stairs. Breathlessly they started to tell Jerry what they had learned.

"Not here!" he said quickly. "Let's go outside where we won't be overheard."

Once out in the open with no one close by, Jerry lent an attentive ear to Penny's tale of their afternoon adventure. He did not have much to say in return, but he studied the jade green elephant and the paper with deep interest.

"You don't think it's anything?" Penny asked in disappointment.

"On the contrary, it may be something of very great importance," he returned soberly. "I'll take this to Headquarters. We have an expert on codes who should be able to break it in a short while."

The girls hoped that Jerry would invite them to accompany him, but he did not do so. Instead he said:

"Penny, you were telling me that Mrs. Deline had buried a package in the sand. Any luck in finding it?"

"Not a bit."

"You don't think that she went back there and dug it up herself?"

"We didn't see any footprints."

"How did you mark the place?"

"By a stick that someone removed."

"Not a very reliable way to take observations," Jerry remarked. "Ever try the clock system?"

The girls looked blank.

"For example," Jerry illustrated, "imagine that the landscape is like the face of a clock. Now what do you see on the hour of two?"

"I don't get it," Louise complained.

"Oh, I do!" laughed Penny. "A big tree!"

"That's right," agreed Jerry. "And at the hour of six?"

"Why, a signboard!" chuckled Penny. "At the hour of seven there's a big sand dune!"

"If you picture things in your mind as if they're on the face of a clock it's much easier to remember and keep them in proper proportion. Now, using that same system can you recall anything more about the place where Mrs. Deline buried the package?"

"Not very much," Penny admitted. "I didn't take notations at the time."

"Speaking of signboards, I remember one," Louise said thoughtfully. "It was a long distance back from the beach, slightly to the right. A cigarette advertisement."

"That's right!" agreed Penny.

"Perhaps that will help some," Jerry said. "We'll have to find the package."

"Then you believe Mrs. Deline is an Enemy Agent?" Penny asked eagerly.

"I've thought so for quite a while now," Jerry admitted. "I didn't say it for fear of building up your hopes. Anyhow, we've got to work quietly in this business."

"Poor Dad," Penny murmured. "I'm afraid it will break him up to learn the truth. Do you say I should tell him right away, Jerry?"

"Why not?" Jerry demanded, his eyes amused. "Your father may have a few things to break to you too, Penny."

"Meaning what?"

"I'll let your father do his own talking," Jerry said, getting up from the hotel bench. "Have to go now."

"Wait!" Penny pleaded. "You've not told us anything. Do you think Mrs. Deline has been aiding that flier who escaped from a Canadian prison camp?"

Jerry deliberately let the question pass. "Listen!" he said urgently. "I may not see you girls again until after dinner. Want to help me tonight?"

"Doing what?" Penny asked.

"I want you to lead me to the place where Mrs. Deline buried that package."

"We'll do our best."

"Then if I don't see you earlier, meet me here at nine o'clock. It should be dark by that time."

"We'll be here," Penny promised, her eyes glowing.

At dinner that night the girls told Mr. Parker of

their appointment to meet Jerry. Penny would have explained about the package, but before she could do so, Mrs. Deline joined the group. Mr. Parker immediately invited her to dine with them. To the annoyance of Penny and Louise she accepted with alacrity.

The girls fully expected that Mrs. Deline would make some reference to the incident of the afternoon. Instead she avoided the subject, talking of her experiences in China and the Orient. Despite their prejudice, Penny and Louise were compelled in all honesty to acknowledge to themselves that the widow was a brilliant, entertaining conversationalist.

Over the coffee cups Mrs. Deline spoke casually of a play which was showing at the local theatre. Before Penny could say a word, Mr. Parker had suggested that he buy tickets for the night's performance.

"I'd love to go," Mrs. Deline accepted instantly.

"Good!" Mr. Parker approved. "I'll get four tickets."

"Two," Penny corrected grimly. "Louise and I already have an appointment."

"That's so," Mr. Parker recalled belatedly.

Mrs. Deline looked so pleased that Penny was sorely tempted to abandon the meeting with Jerry. Only the realization that the task ahead was vitally important, kept her silent.

At eight o'clock Mr. Parker and Mrs. Deline left

the hotel for the theatre. With an hour to kill, Penny and Louise were very restless. They read the evening paper and watched the clock.

"Here's an interesting news item," Penny remarked, indicating a brief story on an inner page of the paper. "It says an enemy submarine was sighted not many miles from here—just off the coast."

"Did they get it?" Louise inquired absently.

"I guess not. The story doesn't say, except that the air patrol dropped bombs."

"Wonder what a single sub was doing so close here?" Louise speculated. "Oh, well, we've nothing to fear."

A clock chimed the hour of nine. On the first stroke, the girls arose and hastened to keep their appointment with Jerry. The night was closing in dark. Along the shore no lights were showing for the dim-out was rigidly enforced at Sunset Beach.

"Where's Jerry?" Penny asked as they reached the bench where they had promised to meet him. "Hope he didn't forget."

Ten minutes elapsed. Penny was examining the luminous dial of her wrist watch when someone came striding down the gravel path.

"Hello," Jerry greeted the girls. "Sorry to have kept you waiting. All set for adventure?"

"Lead on!" Penny laughed.

Taking each of them by an elbow, Jerry guided

the girls down the deserted beach. Twice they passed guards who merely stared and allowed them to pass unchallenged.

"Any news about that code?" Penny questioned as they walked along.

"It's a tough one to break," Jerry replied briefly. "Experts have been trying to take it apart ever since I left you girls this afternoon."

"Then it really is something?" Penny asked, scarcely daring to hope.

"It certainly is," Jerry replied heartily. "We're pretty sure now that Mrs. Deline is mixed up in a bad business. But we can't act until we know absolutely."

"This will be a horrible shock to Dad," Penny remarked. "He's at the theatre with Mrs. Deline now."

"At least she's out of the way, so there's no chance she'll see us at work," Jerry commented. "Think you can find the place to dig?"

Penny had marked it well in her mind, but at night everything looked different. After some uncertainty, the girls agreed upon the dune where the package had been buried.

"With the tide low we'll have plenty of time," Jerry said. "Well, let's go! Was the package buried deep?"

"Not more than a foot," Penny supplied.

"Then if it's here, we'll find it. Let's block this area off and cover it systematically."

For an hour the trio toiled. Twice one of the beach guards passed by and Penny was surprised that he paid no heed to what they were doing.

"Orders!" Jerry chuckled. "You didn't think we could come out here and prowl around without questions being asked? The guard was tipped off. He'll help us by whistling if anyone comes this way."

Louise, who had been industriously digging, gave a low cry.

"Find something?" Jerry demanded.

"I'm not sure. I think so."

The next instant Louise lifted a small package from its sand tomb. Before Jerry could warn her, she had torn apart the pasteboard cover.

"Why, it contains pencils!" she exclaimed in disgust. "Pencils!"

Jerry leaped to her side. One glance and he took the box from her.

"Those objects may look like pencils," he drawled. "But take it from me, they're a bit more deadly."

Penny had moved close. She and Louise stared in awe at the collection.

"Bombs," Jerry explained briefly. "One of these little pencils contains enough explosive to blow us all to Kingdom Come!"

CHAPTER

22

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

THE CARDBOARD box contained in addition to the pencil bombs a shiny knife and several grooved, pear-shaped objects.

"What are those?" Louise asked curiously. "They look like hand grenades."

"That's what they are," said Jerry, lifting one from the box. "It's a mighty useful weapon for close fighting. A strong man can throw a grenade twenty-five to thirty-five yards and it does damage over a large area."

Penny gingerly inspected one of the grenades.

"It won't bite you," Jerry laughed. "Nor will it explode in your hand. When you're ready to throw a grenade you hold it with the lever under your fingers. Just before you toss it, pull the pin."

"Isn't it apt to explode while you're holding it?" Penny asked dubiously.

"Not while the lever is held. When the grenade

leaves the hand, the lever flies off. Then the fuse ignites and in about seven seconds you have your explosion."

"Nice little gadgets," Penny said. She replaced the grenade in its box and ran a finger over the sharp edge of the steel-bladed knife.

"Mrs. Deline evidently planted these weapons here for someone else to use," Jerry remarked. "We'll put them back just as they were."

"Put them back!" Penny echoed. "Why, Jerry, wouldn't that be playing right into their hands? Shouldn't we destroy these things?"

"No, it's much wiser to have the place watched."

Light dawned upon Penny. "Oh, I see!" she exclaimed. "In that way you hope to learn Mrs. Deline's accomplices!"

"Exactly."

Jerry replaced everything in the box which he carefully buried in the sand. Then he obliterated all freshly made footmarks.

"It may be necessary to watch this place for days," he said thoughtfully.

"And what of Mrs. Deline?" Penny asked. "Will she be allowed complete freedom?"

"That's for my superiors to decide. It seems to me, though, that more is to be gained by allowing her to remain at liberty than by arresting her."

"I'm all for jail myself," said Penny.

"Just be patient," Jerry smiled. "And whatever you do, don't drop a hint to Mrs. Deline of what we suspect."

"She knows I dislike her."

"That's all right, but don't let her guess that you consider her guilty of anything more serious than making a play for your father."

"What about Dad? Shouldn't I warn him?"

"Let me take care of that part," Jerry smiled.

"All right," Penny agreed reluctantly. "Just be sure that you don't muff it. Remember, you're playing with my future!"

Jerry finished smoothing out the footprints in the sand and then escorted the girls to the hotel.

"I must report to Headquarters without delay," he said, pausing at the hotel entrance. "Don't worry about the package. We'll have the place watched every minute."

After Jerry had gone, Penny and Louise entered the hotel.

"Is my father here yet?" Penny asked the desk clerk.

"No, Miss. And there's a message for him. As soon as he comes in he's to call Major Gregg."

Penny repeated the name thoughtfully. "That's a new one on me," she remarked. "Dad seems to have friends I know nothing about."

"Oh, the Major comes to the hotel frequently," the clerk returned, smiling. "He and your father are well acquainted."

As the girls crossed the lobby to a drinking fountain, Louise said teasingly:

"I'm afraid you've lost track of your father lately, Penny. You've been so upset about Mrs. Deline that you've scarcely noticed anything or anyone else."

"Dad's been holding out on me, that's evident. Wonder what he's to call Major Gregg about?"

"Why not wait up and see?"

"Not a bad idea," Penny approved instantly. "He and Mrs. Deline should be getting in anytime now."

"I'm not waiting up," announced Louise with a sleepy yawn. "In fact, I'm on my way to bed this minute."

To prove her words she started for the elevator. Penny debated whether or not to follow and finally decided to remain in the lobby.

An hour elapsed. Penny was half asleep by the time Mrs. Deline and Mr. Parker entered the hotel together. They were chatting animatedly and would not have seen her had she not scrambled from the wing chair.

Seeing Penny, Mrs. Deline quickly bade Mr. Parker good night and vanished into an elevator.

"You shouldn't have waited up," Mr. Parker chided his daughter. "Why, it's nearly midnight."

"There's an important message for you, Dad. You're to call Major Gregg."

Mr. Parker looked disconcerted. "How long ago did that call come, Penny?"

"About an hour ago. Or that's when I learned of it."

Mr. Parker went quickly to a telephone booth and was gone for some time. When he returned his face was animated.

"Good news?" Penny asked eagerly.

"Not exactly," Mr. Parker replied, sliding into a chair beside her and dropping his voice. "A message from Interceptor Headquarters. Monitoring machines have traced the outlaw radio station again. The broadcast finished about an hour ago."

"And where was the station located this time, Dad?"

"Seemingly at or near the lighthouse."

"The lighthouse!" Penny exclaimed. She was so startled that her voice rose to a high pitch, attracting the attention of a passing bellboy.

"Not so loud, Penny," her father warned. "The strange thing was that the broadcast seemed to come from a cave, the same as before, although the monitoring machines charted it as being close to the lighthouse."

"The only one I know about near the Point is Crystal Cave," Penny said thoughtfully. "Dad, maybe the broadcast did come from the lighthouse!"

"That's government property, Penny, and the man in charge is beyond suspicion. Furthermore, the deep, echo effect couldn't come from anywhere except a cave."

"Unless it were a sound effect, Dad."

"What's that?" Mr. Parker asked, startled. "I don't get you, Penny."

"I mean, maybe the cave set-up is just a sound effect and nothing more. Only the other night I heard one in a radio play and it sounded as if the actors really were in a cave. Isn't it done by an echo chamber or something of the sort?"

"That would be possible," Mr. Parker agreed. "At Interceptor Headquarters it was assumed that a mistake had been made in charting the location of the station."

"Then the lighthouse hasn't been investigated?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Well, it should be!" Penny exclaimed. "Louise and I were there today and we saw—"

"Yes?" Mr. Parker questioned as she suddenly broke off.

"We saw a lot that didn't look right," Penny finished, deciding not to bring Mrs. Deline's name into the discussion. "Mr. McCoy had visitors and while they were there he kept us locked up."

"My word! Why didn't you report to the police?"

"Well, we weren't entirely sure," Penny said lamely. "The door just closed and locked, and Mr. McCoy let on that it had a trick latch. Then he released us, but not until after the visitors had gone."

"Did you see the persons?"

"No, we only heard their voices. We weren't able to overhear any of the conversation."

Without explaining what he intended to do, Mr. Parker again closed himself into a telephone booth. Not until he returned did he tell Penny that he had called Interceptor Headquarters and that Army men had been sent to the lighthouse to make a thorough check-up.

"Now it's late," he said briskly, "and you're overdue for bed, Penny. Better fly up."

"Aren't you coming?"

"Not just now. I have a little unfinished business."

Penny hesitated, unwilling to go to bed when she sensed adventure in the offing. As she groped in her mind for an excuse to remain, the doors at the front entrance to the hotel began to spin. Jerry came hurrying into the lobby. Seeing Penny and her father he made a straight line for them.

"The code's been broken!" he announced, addressing Penny.

"What did they learn, Jerry?" she asked eagerly.

"It's just as you thought, Penny." Jerry dropped his bombshell. "Mrs. Deline definitely is an Enemy Agent. Apparently she was sent to Sunset Beach to aid that escaped prisoner I told you about!"

CHAPTER

23

NIGHT ADVENTURE

AS JERRY made the startling announcement, Penny glanced anxiously at her father. In the excitement of the moment she had not thought how much of a shock it might be to him to learn that Mrs. Deline was an agent employed by a foreign country. To her astonishment, he looked neither surprised nor dismayed.

"So you have the proof, Jerry!" Mr. Parker exclaimed. "That's fine! But what's all this about a code? How did you stumble onto it?"

"No time for details now," Jerry answered tersely. "Penny turned the trick—she and Louise saw Mrs. Deline bury a package in the sand."

"And Mrs. Deline brought that package from the lighthouse," Penny interposed eagerly. "Mr. McCoy must have given it to her."

"What's the plan of action?" Mr. Parker demanded. "Army men already have gone to the lighthouse to search that place thoroughly."

"Our job is to keep watch of the dune where the package was buried. Naturally we have no way of knowing what time anyone will show up there. It may be an all night wait."

"I'll be with you in a minute," Mr. Parker declared. "Just as soon as I get an overcoat."

He started toward the elevator, then came back to the group.

"What about Mrs. Deline?" he asked. "She's here in the hotel. Went to her room only a few minutes ago."

"She'll be placed under arrest," Jerry said. "Better call her on the telephone and get her down here. Don't let her suspect that you think anything is wrong."

Mr. Parker vanished into the nearest telephone booth.

"I can't understand it," Penny murmured to Jerry. "I was sure Dad was head over heels in love with Mrs. Deline. Why, it didn't even seem to ruffle him when he learned the truth about her."

Jerry grinned. "Maybe," he drawled, "that was because he knew all the time."

Penny was dumbfounded. "You mean—" she

stammered, "You mean that Dad's been acting a part? Pretending to admire Mrs. Deline while actually he didn't?"

"Something like that. You see, your Dad became interested in the outlaw radio station and the men who operate it. By making inquiries before he left Riverview, he obtained information that made him think Mrs. Deline might be involved in some way. He knew she never had been in China but spent many years in Japan. He learned also that instead of being a newspaper correspondent, she had carried on secret work for various governments."

"Dad knew all that! And he never let on to me!"

"He couldn't very well, Penny. If you had guessed the truth, you'd have given it away by your manner —no matter how much you tried to act natural."

"What a little nit-wit I've been!"

"You have not," Jerry denied warmly. "Anyone else would have acted the same. Without knowing it, you helped your father a lot. You turned up evidence he never could have obtained alone."

"Where do you fit into the picture, Jerry? Did Dad send for you?"

"You don't send for anyone in the Army," Jerry explained, grinning. "By pure luck I was assigned here on a special mission. Your father learned I was coming, so we united forces."

"Then you've both known from the first about Mrs. Deline?"

"We've had a dark brown suspicion, Penny. But no proof until tonight."

Penny drew a deep breath. Before she could ask another question, her father came hurrying down the hotel corridor.

"Mrs. Deline's not in her room!" he reported. "She doesn't answer."

"She went upstairs only a few minutes ago," Penny recalled.

"Yes, she did, but she's not there now."

"Maybe she's asleep," Jerry said, "and failed to hear the 'phone. We'll have to check."

Without explaining why the matter was urgent, Mr. Parker arranged with the desk clerk to have one of the hotel maids go to Mrs. Deline's room. While the trio waited in the upstairs corridor, the woman rapped several times on the bedroom door, and failing to get a response, unlocked it with her master key.

"Mrs. Deline!" she called, softly at first, then in a louder voice.

There was no answer.

The maid then snapped on the light. "Why, there's no one here!" she cried. "The bed's not been slept in!"

"That's what I was afraid of," muttered Mr. Parker.

With Jerry and Penny, he entered the bedroom. Everything was in perfect order. However, Mrs. Deline's suitcase was gone and all her belongings had been removed from the closet.

"She's skipped without paying her room rent!" the maid exclaimed. "I'll call the manager!"

Penny was peering into the waste paper basket beside the desk.

"Look!" she drew the attention of her father and Jerry. "Burned letters and papers!"

Digging into the basket, she brought up several charred sheets of paper. They were unreadable and crumpled in her hand.

"This was a bad break for us—Mrs. Deline getting away!" Jerry exclaimed in disgust. "Evidently her work at Sunset Beach is finished. She's moving on to another pasture."

"But she can't be far away," Penny reasoned. "After all, we know when she came to her room."

"There still may be a chance to nab her," Mr. Parker said. "We'll notify the police to guard all the roads and the airport. I'll report to Major Gregg too."

Without awaiting the arrival of the hotel manager, the trio hastened to the lobby. There Jerry and Mr. Parker made several telephone calls.

"Now let's be on our way up the beach," Jerry

urged anxiously. "We've killed too much time as it is."

Penny half expected that her father would refuse permission for her to go along. To her delight he merely said:

"I suppose there's no keeping you here, Penny. Well, come with us. I guess you've earned the right by your good work."

It was a dark night, warm but misty. No lights were showing outside the hotel, though far up the beach the powerful lighthouse beacon cut swathes across the black sea.

"What's the plan?" Mr. Parker asked Jerry.

"The entire coast for fifty miles is being watched. I thought just on a chance we might keep vigil at the place where Mrs. Deline buried the package of explosives. Someone may show up there. On the other hand, Penny tipped off the fact that she knew where the bundle was buried."

"Mrs. Deline watched Louise and me through a spy glass," Penny recalled ruefully. "She knew we didn't find the package though."

"That's our assignment anyhow," Jerry said. "To keep watch of that particular place until relieved by Army men."

The Parker car was on the hotel lot close by. Getting it, the trio took the beach road but stopped some

distance from the lighthouse. Not wishing the car to attract the attention of any passer-by, it was left parked on a private driveway. Jerry, Penny and her father then crossed the dunes afoot and proceeded up the beach until they came to their station.

"Think this is the place?" Penny asked skeptically.

"I know it is," Jerry replied. "Remember what I told you about taking observations? Let's see if the package is still here?"

He began digging in one of the dunes. Almost at once he came upon the box of explosives.

"Exactly as we left it," he reported, replacing the sand. "No one's been here."

"I doubt anyone will come," Mr. Parker commented. "Probably afraid."

High overhead and out of sight, Penny heard the drone of planes on coastal patrol. She stared up into the dark sky and then toward the sea. The tide was coming in and long rolling waves washed the beach, dashed themselves on the shoreline and retreated.

"We'll have to get down out of sight," Jerry warned. "Mustn't be seen from the road or the ocean either one."

"How about this spot?" Mr. Parker suggested, pointing to a hollow between two giant dunes.

The place seemed exactly right, so the trio flattened themselves on the sand. Jerry looked at the luminous dial of his watch.

"One fifteen," he announced. "No sign of activity."

"And no sign of any soldiers," Mr. Parker added. "I hope that whoever is to take over here shows up before long."

"I don't," Penny said, snuggling close between her father and Jerry. "I'm having fun!"

"If anything should develop, it's apt to be serious business," Jerry warned. "I'm inclined to think that we tipped our hand and nothing will happen."

An hour elapsed. During that time there was no sound save the roar of the restless sea. The warm sand made a comfortable couch, and despite her best intentions, Penny caught herself dozing. She had all she could do to keep awake.

"What time is it now?" she presently asked.

"Two thirty-five," Jerry answered. "It doesn't look as if there's to be any activity, but then the night's young."

"The night may be, but I'm not," Mr. Parker grumbled, shifting into a more comfortable position. "Wonder when our relief is to show up?"

"Must be some mix up on orders. We're probably stuck here for the night."

"In that case, Penny should return to the hotel."

"Oh, no, Dad! Anyway, if I left now I might attract the attention of anyone watching this place."

"You thought that one up!" her father chuckled.

"Except for ourselves, there's no person within a quarter of a mile of this place."

"You're wrong about that," murmured Jerry, stiffening to alert attention.

"What's up, Jerry?" Mr. Parker said quickly. "You act as if you were seeing things!"

"I am, Chief! Look to the right—between us and the lighthouse!"

Mr. Parker and Penny gazed intently in the direction indicated.

"Can't see a thing," Mr. Parker whispered. "Your eyes must be tricking you, Jerry."

"Wait just a minute."

Even as Jerry spoke, a shadowy figure emerged from the mists. The man came swiftly down the beach, making no sound as he walked. When he was very close, the revolving beacon of the lighthouse singled him out for a fleeting instant. Brief as was the moment of illumination, Penny recognized the man.

"George Emory!" she whispered tensely. "What's he doing here?"

CHAPTER

24

OUT OF THE SEA

THE ANSWER to Penny's whispered question soon became obvious. George Emory looked carefully about the windswept beach. The three tense watchers thought that he might approach the dune where they lay hidden, but he did not.

Instead, the man paused while several yards away and gazed toward the sea. A moment he stood thus, silhouetted against the sky. Then using a glowing flashlight, he began making wide sweeps with his arm.

"A signal!" Jerry whispered. "He's trying to attract the attention of a boat out at sea!"

"Shall we go for him?" asked Mr. Parker.

"Wait!" Jerry advised. "He's not the only one we're after. We're stalking bigger game."

At intervals for the next fifteen minutes, George Emory repeated the flashlight signals. Then he turned off the light and waited.

Anxiously, Jerry, Penny and Mr. Parker kept their faces turned to the sea. They sensed that the hour of action was at hand, and it worried them that Army men had failed to arrive.

"Look, Dad!" Penny suddenly whispered. She had glimpsed far from shore a long shadowy object which easily could be a boat. No lights were showing nor had she heard any sound.

"I don't see a thing," Mr. Parker whispered back. "Yes! Now I do! Jove! It looks like a submarine that's surfaced. I can make out the conning tower!"

"But why would it dare come here?" Penny speculated. "Won't it be detected by the patrol planes?"

"Tonight's a bad night," Jerry pointed out. "Besides, the shore is so indented at this point of coast that perfect protection is almost impossible. They're sending a boat, that's sure!"

A small craft had been launched from the wave-washed deck of the submarine. Manned by two men who rowed with ruffled oars, it slowly approached the shore. When it was very close the watchers behind the sand dune saw by its grotesque sausage shape that it was a large, rubber boat. Like a gray ghost it slid over the water.

Mr. Parker gripped Penny's hand in an encouraging squeeze.

"Wish you were safe at the hotel," he whispered. "I was a fool to let you come."

Penny's heart pounded but she shook her head vigorously. Not for anything would she have missed the adventure. However, she was cool headed enough to realize that the situation was not shaping up well for her father and Jerry.

There were two men visible in the rubber boat, unquestionably armed. Then George Emory must be reckoned with and the arrival of others might be expected at any moment. Jerry carried a revolver but her father had no weapon. Already it was too late for any member of the trio to safely go for help.

"That sub may intend to land Secret Agents here," Jerry speculated. "But from the code message we deciphered, it's more likely they plan to take aboard one or more passengers."

"Perhaps that escaped flier," Penny supplied.

"He's a valuable man to them. Well worth the risk they're taking to try to rescue him."

"If passengers are to go aboard, where are they?" Penny whispered. "There's no one here but George Emory."

"We must wait and watch. We'll soon see enough or I miss my guess."

The rubber boat had reached the surf and was be-

ing churned by the waves. Two men in full military uniform, leaped out and guided the boat to the beach. George Emory waded out to meet them. Shaking the hand of each, he spoke rapidly in German. Though Mr. Parker understood the language, he was unable to catch a word.

Tensely, the trio waited and watched. At any moment they feared that the men from the submarine might seek the cache of explosives hidden not far away. Soberly Jerry and Mr. Parker considered trying to reach the box in the sand. To do so they must cross an open, unprotected span of beach with every likelihood of being seen.

"Let's wait and see what happens," Mr. Parker advised. "We shouldn't risk calling attention to ourselves."

George Emory and his two companions obviously were awaiting someone. Nervously they paced the beach. Several times Mr. Emory looked at his watch. Then from far down the road came the sound of a car traveling at high speed. Tires screamed in protest as the auto came to a sudden halt on the paved road back from the beach.

"That's why they've waited!" Jerry whispered.

Barely a minute elapsed before two figures were seen coming swiftly from the direction of the road. A man and a woman crawled through the bushes,

under the fence, and walked hurriedly across deep sand to the beach.

"Mrs. Deline!" Penny identified the woman. "The man with her is the same fellow who stole food from our camp!"

"I'd know his face from photographs I've seen," contributed Jerry. "He's Oscar Kleinbrock, escaped German prisoner. The man I was sent here to trace!"

Mrs. Deline and her companion reached the group of men who awaited them.

"You are five minutes late," George Emory reproved.

"Can we help it?" Mrs. Deline snapped. "We're lucky to be here at all. Do you know that the road is being watched?"

"By whom?"

"Army men. We were nearly stopped but were able to turn off into the thicket and wait."

"Then there's no time to waste in talk," George Emory said curtly. Turning, he spoke to the German flier in his own language.

"He's telling him to get aboard the rubber boat," Mr. Parker interpreted tensely. "Now they're saying goodbye to Emory and Mrs. Deline."

"Somehow we must hold them all here!" Jerry whispered grimly.

"It's two against five. And they're armed."

Mr. Parker and Jerry looked at each other, fully realizing how slim was their chance of success. They were not thinking of themselves but of Penny and what could happen to her if they failed. Mr. Parker touched her arm.

"Penny," he whispered. "Slip away in the darkness and make a dash for the hotel. Jerry and I will try to hold them until help comes. Just keep low as you run or those fiends may take a pot-shot at you."

Penny would not desert her father and Jerry. Stubbornly, she shook her head.

"We want to know that you are safe," Jerry urged. "Please go while you still have a chance. You can help us most by bringing help."

Penny's determination to remain, weakened. Yet reason told her she never could reach the hotel and return with help in time to do any good. It dawned upon her that Jerry was only saying what he did to get her safely away.

"If only we had the box of explosives!" she whispered. "With it we might have a chance against those men!"

"It's too late to dig up the box now," said Jerry. "We probably couldn't find it without a light. And the noise we'd make—"

"Let me try," Penny interrupted.

"All right, see if you can get your hands on the

box," her father agreed suddenly. "Slip back of the dune, and then circle. Don't try to cross the beach. Be careful! Remember the least sound will bring a hail of bullets."

Penny nodded and slipped away into the darkness, crawling on hands and knees. Barely had she left the shelter of the big sand dune than she heard two shots fired in quick succession.

"Those came from Jerry's revolver!" she thought. "Oh, it was a trick to get me safely away! Now he and Dad are in for fireworks!"

Raising her head above the protecting sand dune, Penny saw why Jerry had fired. The rubber boat was being launched. To delay the attack would mean that the entire party might escape.

"They'll all get away!" Penny thought in dismay. "How can Jerry and Dad hold them single handed?"

George Emory returned Jerry's fire with deadly aim. The bullets bit into the dune, throwing up little geysers of sand.

"Launch the boat!" he shouted savagely to the men from the submarine. "Get away while you can! Be quick!"

Jerry and Mr. Parker were determined that the party should not escape. As the men sought to launch the rubber boat, they made a concerted rush for the German flier who was to be taken aboard the waiting

submarine. Caught by surprise, he went down beneath their blows.

Fearful of hitting his own man, George Emory dared not fire again. Instead, he and the crewmen of the submarine fell upon Jerry and Mr. Parker. In the melee, one person could not be distinguished from another.

"Fools! Fools!" cried Mrs. Deline as she watched the fierce, uneven struggle. "There is no time to be lost!"

Jerry and Mr. Parker were putting up the fight of their lives, but they were no match for four able bodied, trained men. Penny, desperate with anxiety, saw that the struggle could end only in one way—disaster for Jerry and her father.

"If I had that box of explosives maybe I could help them!" flashed through her mind.

Rolling over a dune, she ran to the place near the fence where she thought the cache was buried. Frantically she clawed and dug at the sand. She could not find the box.

"It must be here!" she told herself desperately. "Or was it hidden in the next dune?"

She tried another place slightly to the right. As she dug, she heard a sound behind her. Turning swiftly, she saw Mrs. Deline starting across the beach toward her.

"Oh, no, you don't!" the woman shouted.

Penny's hand encountered something hard and firm. The box of explosives! Digging wildly, she lifted it from the bed of sand and sprang to her feet. Her fingers closed upon one of the hand grenades.

"Get back!" she ordered Mrs. Deline, balancing herself as if to throw.

The woman stopped short, then retreated a few steps. But only for a moment was she frightened.

"Why, you infant, you couldn't throw a grenade!" she jeered. "You don't know how. Besides, you haven't the nerve!"

"Get back!" Penny ordered again. "I warn you."

Mrs. Deline laughed scornfully and came on.

Even the thought of throwing a hand grenade terrified Penny. She knew that she could not deliberately harm Mrs. Deline or even the men who were mercilessly beating her father and Jerry. Yet she had to do something.

"Maybe I can destroy the rubber boat!" she thought. "It's far enough away so that no one should be hurt by the explosion."

Whirling away from Mrs. Deline, Penny faced the sea. Fixing her eyes on her target, the rubber boat at the water's edge, she hurled the grenade.

"Idiot!" cried Mrs. Deline, flinging herself flat on the sand to protect her face from flying fragments.

Penny did likewise. The grenade dropped with a thud on the sand beside the rubber boat. Her aim had been perfect. But there was no explosion. Belatedly, Penny realized that she had forgotten to pull the safety pin.

Mrs. Deline kept her face buried beneath her arms and did not yet know what had happened. Sick with the knowledge that she had failed, Penny was desperate. Her father and Jerry were being cruelly beaten by their opponents. In another minute they would be overpowered and the Germans would escape to the waiting submarine.

"I can't let them get away!" Penny whispered. "I must do something!"

Remembering the pencil bombs, she groped in the cardboard box for them. They were not there. Instead, her fingers closed upon the sharp bladed knife.

"I'll slash the rubber boat!" she thought. "I'll try to make a hole in it!"

Before Mrs. Deline realized what the girl was about, Penny darted down the beach. The men from the submarine did not see her. Reaching the rubber boat, she leaped into it. Working with desperate haste, she jabbed the knife through the bottom. The material was tough and it took all of her strength to make a long jagged gash. Water seeped in, slowly at first, then faster.

"I've done it!" Penny thought jubilantly. "I've done it!"

Her triumph was fleeting. The next instant the girl was struck a hard stunning blow from behind. As she collapsed in a limp little heap on the sand, she dimly saw the cruel, angry face of Mrs. Deline. Then all went black and she knew no more.

CHAPTER

25

A SCOOP FOR UNCLE SAM

PENNY OPENED her eyes and wondered where she was. For a moment she could remember nothing of what had transpired. Gradually, she realized that she was lying down, her head pillowed in someone's lap. She seemed to be in a fast-moving motor boat for she could hear the wash of waves against the craft. In panic she decided that she must be a prisoner en-route to the German submarine. She struggled to sit up.

"Easy there, partner," said a soothing voice.

Penny twisted sideways to look at the speaker. "Jerry!" she whispered.

"You're all right," he said, pressing her gently back. "We'll get you to a doctor in a few minutes."

"A doctor, my eye!" Penny protested with spirit.

"That was a nasty blow Mrs. Deline gave you on the head," contributed another voice.

Penny turned again and saw her father. His shirt was half torn off and there was a long gash on his cheek.

"Dad, you're hurt!"

"Nothing but a few scratches, Penny. Jerry took worse punishment than I did. But you should see the other fellows!"

"What happened?" Penny asked. "Where am I anyhow?"

"In a patrol boat bound for the hotel."

"But what happened on the beach? The last I remember was when I tried to slash the rubber boat."

"You not only tried, you did!" chuckled Jerry. "Mrs. Deline struck you on the head with something —maybe a rock—and you went down for the count. About that time, some of the Army boys arrived. Mrs. Deline and her crowd tried to make a get-away, but the boat couldn't be launched."

"Then what happened?" Penny demanded as Jerry paused for breath.

"The two members of the sub crew tried to swim. They were picked up by a patrol boat that had been drawn to the locality by the gun fire."

"And Mrs. Deline?"

"She and her pal Emory, together with the escaped flier, struck off across the sand dunes."

"They didn't get away?"

"Not on your life. They reached the road and there found a nice reception awaiting them! Right now the three are lodged at Headquarters."

Penny took a deep breath. Her head was throbbing but she scarcely felt the pain.

"What about Jim McCoy at the lighthouse?" she inquired.

"He was taken into custody earlier in the evening. A portable broadcasting outfit was found on the premises."

"Then Mr. McCoy really was the man responsible for those mysterious broadcasts—the Voice from the Cave?"

"No doubt he had helpers," Mr. Parker contributed. "We expect to track down most of the ring now that the leaders have been captured. At any rate, we've put an end to the broadcasts. Your other theory was right too, Penny."

"What theory, Dad?"

"That the cave effect was produced by an echo chamber."

"Then no broadcast ever originated in a cave?"

"Probably not. We know McCoy shifted locations frequently. Tonight was the first time he ever dared broadcast from the lighthouse."

"And what of the old beachcomber, Jake Skagway?"

"Just a beachcomber," Jerry answered. "He had no connection with Emory or Mrs. Deline."

Penny lay perfectly still for a few minutes, gazing up at the dark sky. A few stars pricked the black canopy above her, and now and then a quarter moon peeped from behind a cloud screen.

"How did I get aboard this boat?" she presently inquired.

"Another patrol boat came by," Jerry explained. "In fact, after all the fireworks, just about everyone in Sunset Beach arrived on the scene. We wanted to get you to a doctor so we took the first transportation that offered."

"Almost there now too," added Mr. Parker.

Penny sat up. The shore was dark but she could dimly see the dark Crystal Inn hotel.

"I don't need a doctor," she laughed. "I'm feeling better every minute. My, won't Louise be green with envy when she learns what she missed!"

"I'd say she was lucky," Mr. Parker corrected. "Penny, you don't seem to realize what a narrow escape we all had."

"That's right," added Jerry, "those men were desperate, and they'd have stopped at nothing. I guess we owe our lives to you, Penny."

Penny loved the praise. Nevertheless, she replied with a show of modesty:

"Oh, I didn't do a thing, Jerry. As a matter of record, I nearly messed up the show. When I threw that hand grenade I forgot to pull the safety pin."

"I'm glad you did," chuckled Jerry. "If it had exploded, we might not be here now."

Penny sat very still, thinking over what had happened. Events were a bit hazy in her mind and many questions remained unanswered.

"The submarine?" she asked after a moment.

"Sunk," Jerry replied. "One of our patrol planes scored a direct hit."

"I guess that brings me up to date," Penny sighed. "There's only one thing that bothers me."

"What's that?" inquired her father.

"Did you know who Mrs. Deline was when you invited her to come with us to Sunset Beach?"

"No, but I had a healthy suspicion that she might be working against our country, Penny. I first met Mrs. Deline at the Club. However, she was rather transparent in making a play for my attention. In checking up I discovered that she never had been in China and never had written a newspaper story in her life. When she practically invited herself to ride with us to Sunset Beach, I thought I'd try to find out more about her little game."

"I acted so silly about everything," Penny acknowledged, deeply ashamed. "I'm sorry, Dad."

"You needn't be, Penny. At times you were rude

to Mrs. Deline which was wrong. But your actions served a good purpose by keeping the woman so diverted that she never was on her guard."

Shore was very close. As the powerful engines of the motor boat became muted, Penny said wistfully:

"Now that your work is done here, Jerry, I suppose you'll be winging off to some far corner of the country."

"Not for a few days at least," he reassured her. "I'm expecting a furlough and I'll spend it right here at Sunset Beach. We'll cram those days full of fun, Penny. We'll swim and golf and dance. We'll make every minute count."

The boat grated gently against the dock and a sailor leaped out to make the craft fast. Mr. Parker and Jerry helped Penny ashore. Though she tried to stand steady upon her feet, the boards rocked beneath her.

"Hook on," invited Jerry, offering an arm.

Mr. Parker supported her on the other side, and thus they walked slowly toward the hotel.

"The Three Musketeers!" chuckled the editor. " 'One for all, and all for one.' "

"We do make a trio," agreed Penny. "Tonight it seems just as it did when we were together in Riverview working on a big news story. There's one difference though."

"What's that?" asked Jerry.

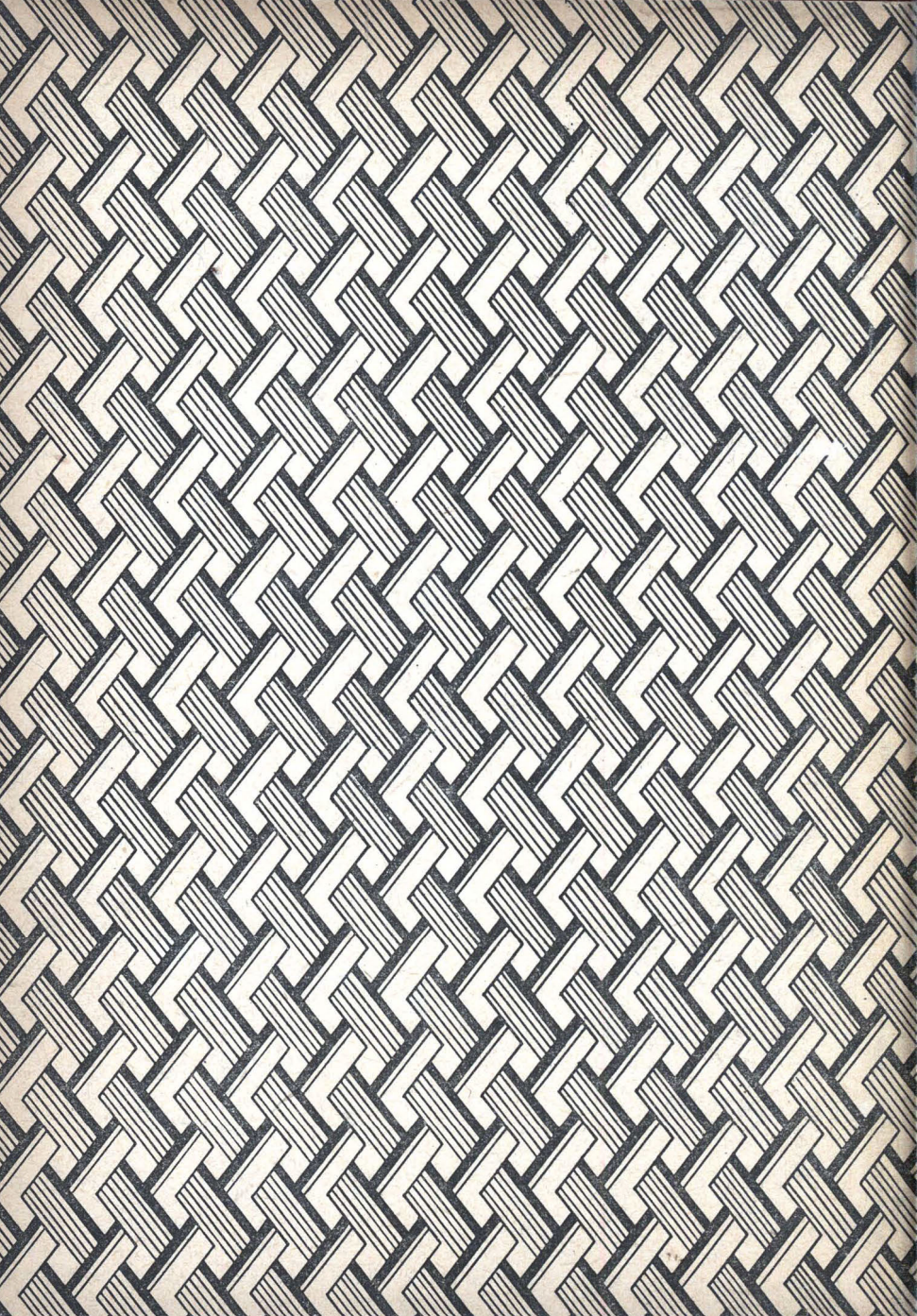
"Tonight we were actors in a little drama that should be page one on any newspaper. Yet neither of you news hawks so much as spoke of trying to get a scoop for the *Riverview Star*."

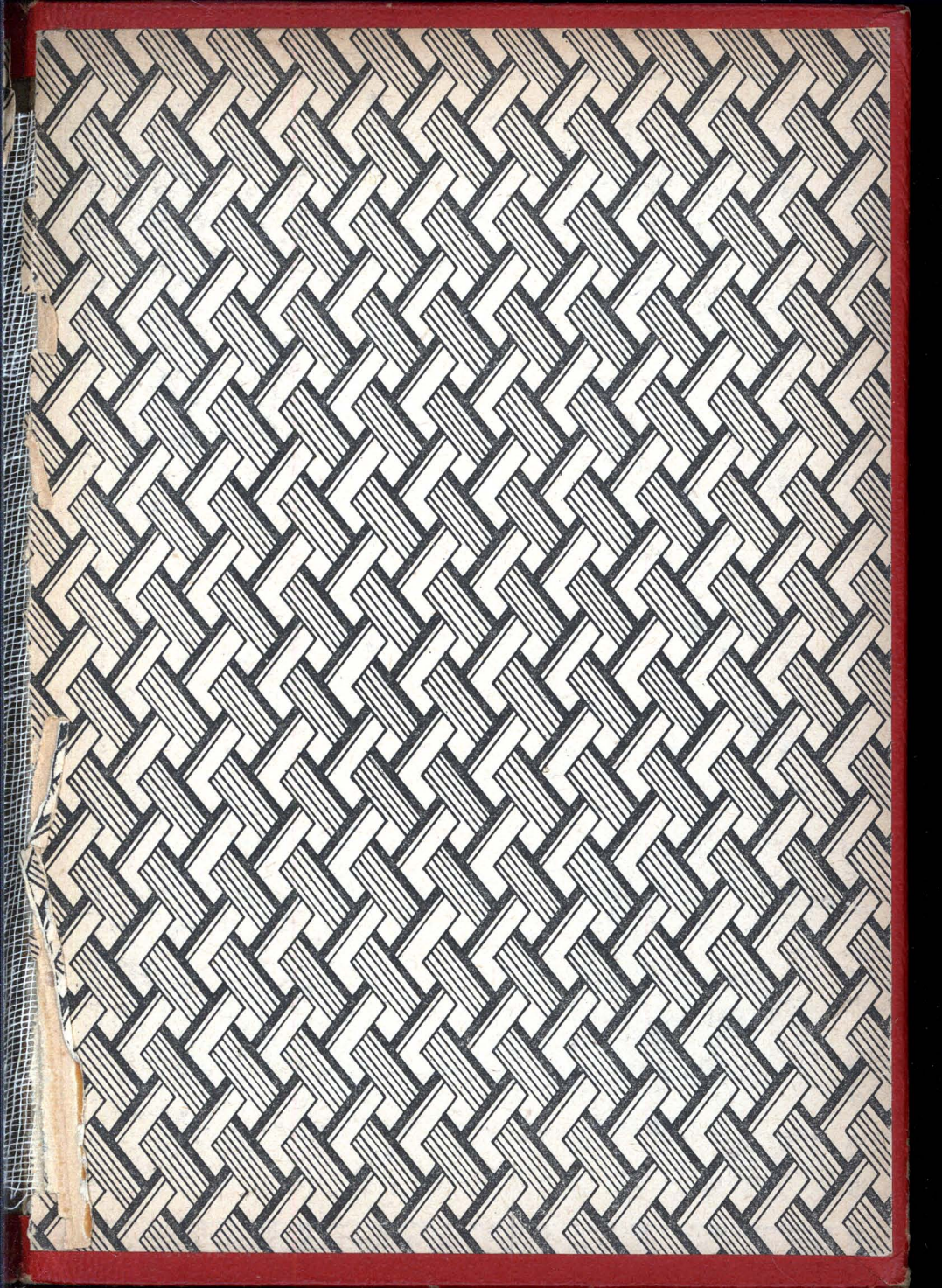
"Good reason," rumbled Mr. Parker. "The story of what happened tonight may never be published."

"I understand, Dad. If the news were printed now it might give valuable information to the enemy."

Penny paused to catch her breath. With Jerry and her father still supporting her, she turned to face the restless sea. The patrol boat had slipped away into the darkness. Far up shore, unmindful that her faithless master had gone, the bright beacon from the lighthouse swept the water at regular intervals. Nothing seemed changed.

"Curtain going down on one of the best adventures of my life," Penny said softly. "Who cares that the *Riverview Star* missed the story? Why, this was an A–1 scoop for Uncle Sam!"





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